

THE MASK

Based on a true historical incident, this is a story of love and passion against a background of war. Once again the great wagon wheels roll over the African veld, as the Voortrekkers of the eighteen fifties prepare to face the Kaffir warriors under the chieftains Mapela and Makapan.

Two girls, Sybella and Mina, one dark and one fair, compete for the love of Simon van der Berg, a young trader and artist whose desire for adventure has brought him to the frontier. Torn between his love for both, caught in the turbulence of the times, Simon is forced into manhood. Old Schalk Fourie, the "man in the mask" whose name at one time was anathema, comes through his trials and emerges as a leader of men notable for their hardihood. Jappie, the orphaned child, finds a new home when his sister gives her life for a friend.

Here again is the pulse of Africa, the Africa of yesterday which in the back veld still beats to the rhythm of the drum.

This is the fourth of Stuart Cloete's novels, dealing with the van der Berg family. The first was *The Turning Wheel*, a Book Club Choice in both England and the United States. *The Mask* has the same power, the same unforgettable drama, as with horse and gun and Bible, the Boers strive to tame a continent.

By the Same Author

Novels

TURNING WHEELS
WATCH FOR THE DAWN
THE HILL OF DOVES
CONGO SONG
THE CURVE AND THE TUSK
MAMBA

Non-Fiction

AFRICAN PORTRAITS
THE AFRICAN GIANT

STUART CLOETE

THE
MASK

COLLINS

ST JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON

1921

23113

© STUART GLOTT, 1957

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

COLLINS CLEAR-TYPE PRESS : LONDON AND GLASGOW

*Dedicated to the memory
of
the twenty-eight persons murdered
by the Kaffirs in
September 1854*

AT MOORDDRIFT

WILLEM PRINSLOO	JAN BREED
NELLIL PRINSLOO	MARIA BREED
AND THREE CHILDREN	AND THREE CHILDREN
LOURENS BRONKHORST	LIJF DU PREEZ

AT PRUIZEN

ALBERTUS VENTER	WILHELM VENTER
-----------------	----------------

AT MAPPIA

HERMANUS POTGIETER, VELD-KORNET	
ANDRÉUS POTGIETER	JACOBUS COLIZIE
WILHELM POTGIETER	MARTINUS VILJFE
JACOBUS HENDRIK BOTHA	PHIL BOTHA

and others, names unknown

An acknowledgment and appreciation to Nancy Courtney Acutt, Hester Gavin Graham and E. A. Galpin, all of Naboomspruit, for their help in the necessary research. And to my wife — Rehana “Tiny” Cloete — who travelled with me over the Zoutpansberg, Waterberg and the Springbok Flats, helping me gather material for this book.

S. G.

Author's Note

THE EVENTS described happened in 1852-54—just over a hundred years ago. There are men alive to-day, both black and white, whose fathers were engaged in these wars. An American parallel can be found in the Indian Wars where the pioneers found themselves face to face with the prairie and desert Indian tribes of the West. In Africa there was equally a clash of cultures in which the iron of the white man struck a spark from the flint of the savage, igniting a continent. Civilisation cannot be halted. As the Bantu spears overcame the bushmen's arrows, so the guns of the Boers overcame the assegais of the Africans who were pressing down from the north as the white man advanced from the south.

I have crossed the Nyl ford or Moorddrift, as the Afrikaaners call it, many times on my way to the Zoutpansberg. I have seen the thorn trees, now a national monument, against which Makapan's Kaffirs dashed the brains of the Boer children. I have visited the caves of Makapan, and know men who in their youth picked up human skulls and bones in their depths.

There is no doubt that Paul Kruger, later President of Transvaal, actually went into the caves and brought out prisoners, or that he rescued Potgieter's body when wounded and led the Boers barefooted up the cliff to storm Mapela's stronghold. None about the other Potgieter's torture, or the murder of his party. There is a monument raised to these pioneer dead in Potgietersrus, now a thriving town, named after him.

I have farmed and hunted buck in the Springbok Flats and the Waterberg. I have bathed in the hot springs of Warmbad,

AUTHOR'S NOTE

now a health resort with a big swimming-pool. So for thirty years these stories of our country have been in my mind and heart. The lions and elephant—even much of the lesser game—have gone, but there are still baboons and leopards in the hills, vultures still nest in the high cliffs and the past still impinges on the present, in an Africa where, once away from the great North Road, the veld remains unchanged. Giant trees—baobabs, acacias, euphorbias and marulas—still stand which must have offered their fruits and shade to many strange adventurers, marauding Kaffirs, white hunters and renegades, Arab traders, tiny bushmen, even Chinese seeking tin have rested here, for the true history of Africa is lost, hidden by the centuries as the mountains are hidden by their cloak of summer mist.

What do we know of Zimbabwe? Or the ancient gold mines of Rhodesia? Who mined tin at Rooiberg or copper at Messina?

Africa is still the continent of mystery—a land of many questions and few answers.

As far as possible I have stuck to the truth, obtaining it from such documents and information as are available. The sacrificial hill has been moved a hundred miles. To-day it is known as Kranskop and stands out like a sugarloaf on the plain between Nylstroom and Naboomspruit. I invented the white python but not the sacredness of snakes to some tribes. But there are white pythons, as there are white or albino varieties of most species. There is no doubt about the essential facts. There is no doubt about the cannibalism that took place or of the use of human flesh for *muti* or medicine. Such things still take place to-day in isolated areas.

Schoemansdal has ceased to exist. Founded in 1848, it was finally abandoned in 1867 when it was found impossible to hold it against the Bavenda who fired the town, destroying it as the last wagons with their rearguard of burghers pulled out.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Later, a new town—Louis Trichard—was built eight miles away.

To understand these times it is only necessary to think of the Indian Wars and the settlement of the American West where the pioneers pressed against the tribes who held the land. Good and evil are hard to assess, progress hard to define, but inevitably in all countries the rifle has proved stronger than the spear or bow. In each, development has followed conquest, and savage men and wild territories have become civilised and integrated from an Iron Age past into the technological present.

At the height of its prosperity Schoemansdal contained 278 dwelling-houses, a church, a mill run by water power, and a courthouse, and had a population of 1,800 souls—of whom 800 were fit for war service. It imported 200,000 pounds of lead, 5,000 pounds of coffee, and 10,000 pounds of sugar—all by ox wagon from more than one thousand miles away. The exports were beans, mealies (corn), spirituous liquors, honey, dried fruit, wax, tanned hides, salt, hippo teeth, ox and buffalo horns, beams, planks, butter, cheese, ivory and ostrich plumes in great quantities.

C O N T E N T S

1	The Drift	<i>page</i> 13
2	The Matriarch	16
3	The Hunt	38
4	The Wagon	50
5	To the North	71
6	The Flood	83
7	The Jewel of the North	97
8	Ships that Pass in the Night	105
9	The Honey Cliff	111
10	God Must Eat	121
11	The Slavers	128
12	The Mark of Cain	141
13	The Blue Wagon	159
14	Commando	174
15	The Road Back	184
16	The Kaffirs Assemble	196
17	The Siege	210
18	The Death of a Multitude	217
19	Mapela's Kop	230
20	The Spear	241
21	Moorddrift	250
	Glossary	256

1. The Drift

THE WATER flowed slowly past the reeds that edged the drift. It was some hours since the last wagon had crossed the Nyl, as the Boers called this little river. The wheel spoor at the water's edge had been smoothed off, planed away by the slow-moving current. The birds were back. A black heron shaded its eyes with raised wings as it peered into the dark brown water looking for the small frogs and fish on which it lived. A flock of white cattle egrets were perched on the three big thorns that shaded the outspan. This evening no one was camped here. There were no tented wagons drawn up by the roadside. No smoke rose from cooking fires. No oxen grazed. No children played.

Except for the road leading to Zoutpansberg there was no sign that man, either black or white, had ever been here. There was no sound except for the bark of a baboon in the hills and the cries of the tick birds quarrelling as they roosted.

But this drift was the hub of events that were to come. From the south, the east, the west and the north people were moving through time toward it, driven to this pinpoint in Africa by the pressures of their various circumstances. Driven by hopes of profit, by the love of adventure, by a desire for war, revenge and blood.

Then—in 1852—this place was known as the Nyl drift. A good place to outspan and camp. There was grass and water and shade trees. There was game for the pot and what more, in

THE MASK

so wild a country, could a man ask of God than this? To-day it is called Moorddrift—the murder ford. And a monument to the dead still to be massacred here, stands in Potgietersrus, the nearest town.

In the north men talked with nostalgia of the south whence they had come trekking so arduously over the plains and mountains to reach this—the end of the white man's world. In the south the young men talked of the north—the place where life was free, the farms wide and unsurveyed, the hunting good and the rewards, for those who survived, beyond the imagination of man. Of course both the rewards and the nostalgias were exaggerated. Those in the south were loath to give up their comfortable thatched homesteads; those in the north, whatever the hardships they endured, were unready to return to the circumscribed lives they and their fathers had led at the Cape. But each had their dreams. For this is the nature of man—to dream about what he has not got. About what he has lost, or dare not seek.

To-day as in those days the same sun still shines over the drift in the daytime, the same stars still pierce the cloak of the night. They were the same, too, before men came here and only the wild beasts drank from the banks of the river. The wild beasts and the little yellow bushmen hunters who later were crushed, ground to nothingness between the black millstone of Kaffirs coming from the north and the white adventuring farmers advancing from the south. Of them only their paintings in the hills remain as a testament. And perhaps a little of their blood, for conquerors seldom exterminate a race totally. The women, or at least the youngest of them, are often spared. But this was the day of the beast; of the elephant, the rhinoceros, the seacow, the camel, or *kameel* as the Boers called the giraffe. Vast herds of springbuck, hartebeest, eland, zebra and wildebeest roamed the bush. Buffalo stood

THE DRIFT

with curved massive scimitar horns chewing their cuds in the shade of the trees. Lions roared, kings then of the forest. Leopards lay like great spotted cats sunning on the high rocks.

But at this time—the now—the very living day of that not so long ago in this part of the world, the Kaffirs had arrived and were entrenched with kraals and herds of cattle, cultivated fields of mealies and Kaffir corn worked by their women. And the white men had built the toy town of Schoemansdal, in a mountain cup of the Zoutpansberg range. Beyond it on the north side of the range the land changed in character. It was almost waterless, much hotter, and the great baobabs grew like monstrous vegetables out of the parched red soil.

2. The Matriarch

A THOUSAND MILES away to the south, near the Great Fish River, Mevrouw Jacoba Johanna Fourie attended to her affairs. - Mevrouw Fourie was a small thin woman of fifty-two. She dressed in black. A black dress buttoned up to her neck with long sleeves and a black kappie when she went out of the house into the scorching sun. She had ten living children, tall sons and daughters who took after their father. Three of her children were dead. She had thirty-one grandchildren. She had lost count of the grandchildren who had died. Under her corset her breasts hung flat, their nipples chewed by the savagery of the babies that she had suckled overlong. But she had raised more than most by letting them suck when they could stand at her side and drink like calves from a cow.

She did not know if she loved her children. There was no need to know. They were hers. Of her blood and bone and the pain of her bearing. She was somewhat astonished at their size. And when they surrounded her she became invisible, reaching scarcely up to the shoulders of Francina, her shortest daughter. Of her sons, Gert was the tallest, the finest. And his belt buckle came up to her eyes. She was of French Huguenot origin, having been born Marais. It showed in her appearance. Her dark, almost black eyes, her small size so different from most Boer women who ran to flesh. Her fiery nature. The flame of her character which burned like fire within her and dominated all those who belonged in her life—her husband,

her children, her servants, were all equally afraid of this small woman, and all equally dependent on her in any crisis.

In her heart she despised size, even in livestock, for the small seemed to her to survive drought and disaster better than the large. And surely ten small cows alive were worth more than a hundred big ones dead? Survival, living, staying alive, were what mattered. Something was lost in size. Some quickness, some agility of both mind and body. There was more room for weakness in a big animal. She had yet to see a big horse that was not weak in the loin or legs. And they foundered more quickly. This was a continual cause of dissension with her husband, who, because he was so big himself, liked to be surrounded by giants of every kind. His great love was for his span of long-horned red Afrikander oxen which that young man from Cape Town was painting now.

He called himself an artist, this Simon van der Berg. "I am a painter," he said when he had arrived with a mounted servant and a pack horse. An artist. A painter. She had never heard of such a thing in her life. A big strong young man who spent his life, wasted his life really, with a brush and paints, drifting here and there like a leaf in the wind.

Schalk, her husband, had set him to painting his wagon first. He had painted it bright blue with yellow wheels. Then he painted designs of flowers on the body. Very realistic they were too. Being just, she had to acknowledge this. Flowers of various kinds, that he had picked in the veld, copied, and surrounded with varicoloured scrollwork. Then Schalk had told him to paint a picture on canvas of the wagon and the oxen so that he could hang it in the house. It was like his madness to waste money on a thing like that. A picture. Could one eat it? Could one use it? Why, magtig, if he wanted to see his span and wagon all he need do was tell the boys to inspan it and stare to his heart's content. Men were certainly mad. All men. Her husband. Her sons. And certainly that young Simon

who had laughed so hard when Schalk had told him to paint the wagon. He was a painter, wasn't he?

"I paint pictures, Mcneer," he said, "portraits and so on."

Her husband had said, "First paint my wagon and then we shall see."

Well, now they had seen. The picture was done and you could certainly recognise the oxen. Blom, Rooiland, and the rest. Schalk would stare at it between his fingers as he knelt at prayers. She could see his lips move as he repeated the oxen's names to himself instead of asking for protections and forgiveness of the Almighty. This was not only a blasphemous thing to do but it set a bad example to the children and the servants, which was worse.

She looked round the great kitchen with its open fireplace. Everything was going well. A coloured maid was turning the hindquarters of a sheep on a spit. The big copper soup kettle was simmering on the open hearth beside the other pots. This afternoon they would make soap with the fat rendered down from the last pig they had killed, boiling it and mixing it with lye.

She thought of all the work on the farm. The biltong—the dried meat—to be prepared, the pig bowels to be washed for sausage skins, the rusks, the boerworst, the candles, the butter to be salted, the pickles and chutneys, the konfyts to be put into jars and sealed with green bladders. There were wild immortelle flowers to be picked for the mattresses, the geese to be plucked of their down, the poultry to be raised. First the eggs to be set and then the chicks attended to. She kept hens, turkeys, guineas, ducks, geese. Then there were the vegetables and fruit trees of the kitchen garden and the seeds to be saved for the next season, and clothes to be made and mended. All the endless work of a great farm and its people, where little but powder and shot, sugar and coffee and clothing material was ever bought from the town a hundred miles away. Twice a

THE MATRIARCH

year the wagons went in laden with skins, ostrich feathers, wool and casks of salted butter. They came back with the supplies that must last six months.

Sybella, her youngest girl, was setting the places in the dining-room. The men would soon be in from the lands and the stock, smelling of sweat, manure and tobacco. They would eat with their hats on their heads and with the help of the girl she would feed them, for Boer women did not sit with their men. Her husband and her three youngest unmarried sons, Frikkie, Kaspar and Jan. The two older ones, noisy and rough like young colts, were already riding far and wide looking for wives that might suit them. Strong young girls whose fathers were wealthy, owners of farms that would be their daughters' portions. And the girls eager, ripe as plums for the preserving pan of marriage, but wanting the best men, the strongest, the best off, the finest shots and horsemen, men able not only to breed them but protect them and their young. They called it love but it was not that, it was lust, like the mating of animals, to which was joined the cupidity of men and maids, each wanting the best of the bargain, each hoping for more than they gave.

Before young Simon came she had thought she had had everything in her life, both good and bad, but now she found she might have missed something. Something that had no name. Any more than the perfume of a flower has a name.

She was still thinking of him when he came in.

"I must go soon, Tanta Jacoba," he said.

"Why?" she said. She did not want him to go. She also wanted him to go.

"Because I have finished here. The picture is done. The mountains call." He looked at the hills. "Do you know what lies beyond them, Tanta Jacoba?"

"I do not know."

"That is the difference between us," he said. "There must

be some trek-Boer in my blood. I must see what is beyond the hills."

"More hills, young man," she said.

He said, "Ja, and beyond them? Beyond," he said, "that is where the wonders lie, on the rim of the beyond. Over the curve of its surface, below the horizon."

"You do not believe the world is round?" she said aghast. "It is flat like a saucer."

"And then?" he asked. "What happens when you reach the edge?"

"I do not know. No man has ever reached the end and come back."

"Mevrou," he said, "I have talked to many men, mariners and educated men, and it is proved that the world is round. Round like an orange."

"Then why do those on the bottom not fall off?"

"That is gravity," he said, "the force that holds us to the earth."

"What nonsense," she said. "How can you listen to such old wives' tales." She began to dish up the food as she heard the other men come in.

Tanta Jacoba had seen too much to have many illusions. Too much life and death, too much breeding of man and beast. God's command was to increase and multiply, and certainly the young were ready to do God's work in this direction anyhow. The girls as wide-eyed and skittish as heifers, the boys blatant and boisterous as young bulls. Only in Simon did she see something different, for though she despised his profession she admired his education, his manners. He alone took off his hat in the house and his ideas though curious, like the world being round, were interesting. His search for beauty. His belief in it. Not only the beauty of a flower which any fool could see, but in a shadow, in the way a branch grew on a tree, in the perfection of a serpent's movement, in the articulation

of a joint. In love. He had queer ideas about love. They were not quite decent. "He did not see women as the mothers of his children, as housekeepers, as a superior kind of livestock, but as something else. Something almost sacred. He talked of the way a hand fell from the wrist, of the softness of a woman's hair. She believed, though he had never said so, that he had drawn women naked. He even considered the Kaffirs beautiful and talked of the bloom on their skins as if they were grapes. The strange thing was that he came of a good family. His father was a wine farmer in the Constantia Valley of the Cape. Why had he left?

"How did your father let you go?" she asked him.

"My father was not pleased," he said, "but he saw that it was necessary to me. I started as a child drawing with charcoal on the whitewashed walls of the great wine cellar. Then I met a Frenchman who taught me about painting and mixing colours. Now my plan is to trek about seeing the world and painting as I go. One day I shall reach the north—the Transvaal and the Free State. One day I shall see the wonders of God's creation, the great herds of game, the forests and the mountains." When he spoke like this his blue eyes became dreamy like the eyes of a child. Oh yes, she liked him but he annoyed her. He put ideas into her head that were not practical. Sometimes she thought, *Suppose I had met him when I was a girl?* Then she knew why he disturbed her, for she would have followed him. Followed him to the ends of the earth.

She watched him as he ate, as he looked about him in the room taking in what he saw. She watched his quick deft movements. His eyes roved round the room. He would have done for Sybella if she had not had other plans. If it had not been for Botha's land which adjoined their own? If she could have controlled him as she controlled the others—but this was wild blood. Artist's blood. He was a boy who would follow his star and refuse to be commanded. In her heart, that was still in

some ways young, she saw his charm, his strength and beauty and was almost, if such a thing was possible, jealous of her own daughter.

When the men had eaten, the women ate. Afterward they rested. Jacoba did not sleep. She thought of the farm. The way they—or rather she—had made it.

The house was built in a square with few windows and a great gate that was commanded by loopholes now bricked up, but which had been used when the farm was attacked some thirty years before.

Jacoba had been a bride then, a young wife with two children at foot and a third on the way. But she had fought with the men, loading their guns and firing occasionally herself.

It came back to her as if it were yesterday. The coloured boys running in from the lands shouting, *The Kaffirs!—the Kaffirs!* Her husband's voice. His brother's. The handing out of guns to the men servants and labourers, the maidservants' sobs of terror at their fate if the Kaffirs won. Rape, magtig, plenty of girls were raped—a matter usually of not saying yes in time. But this was death, and the slow mutilation of inconceivable, painful indignity, of impalement, of torture by pointed sticks, by fire, by cutting with assegais, by slow attack from frantic ants, pinned out like a skin set to dry on their seething heaps.

Oh yes, it was like yesterday. She saw her husband running and a Kaffir behind him fling a spear. She saw his big hound turn upon the Kaffir and pull him down, ripping out his throat. She saw the dog speared and die. She had opened the door for Schalk. The boys had already begun to shoot. The Kaffirs were massing, their black ostrich-plumed capes shimmering and gleaming in the sunlight, their spears shining. Guns were being fired all round her. The house was filled with the smoke of powder. There were cries of the wounded Kaffirs and the shouts of the attackers as they came on again. The curses of the coloured servants. Her husband's exhortations. His cry

that God was with them. That the Philistines were being smitten once again. His brother's roars. He was an even bigger man than Schalk, a man like a mad bull who could bend iron bars in his hand and bite six-inch nails in two. It was strange that he had died in bed only two years later.

Sometimes Tanta Jacoba went out and looked at the *Ouplek*, as the house was known. More fort than farm. Looked at the loopholes that a blow with the end of a broomstick would open for gunfire again. From the outside they were masked with dagga, plaster and lime wash. But inside, each was a little slit that held something, each was used as a shelf for a bottle, a spoon or a powder horn.

Ja, all was peaceful now and the sun shone. But for how long? In Africa you never knew. Like a storm that came so suddenly out of a blue sky the Kaffirs could come sweeping down once more. No, they could not. This she knew, for here on the Great Fish River they were now broken, but in the north she heard the situation was what it had been here then. It was in that *then* that she lived, more vividly than in the *now* of to-day; for then she had been young, alive, hot, with blood in her, and warm milk for her babies. Then she had been a woman fully alive and conscious of it, of her womanliness that was like that of a cow, or a mare or a bitch, but so much more than that because she was human, endowed with a will to create, to capture, to hold, to go on and on, and never let go. With a woman there was more than just an animal femaleness. There was this *force* that projected itself into her children's lives, driving them on long after they had left her side, nourishing them as it were with the milk of her wisdom, and her power, even when they themselves were mothers and fathers, apt as any in procreation.

On the walls of the great room, the *voorkamer*, the men's guns hung across pairs of bushbuck horns painted sky blue, attached

to fragments of their skulls. A big hand-made nail driven in below the horns in the forehead bone held the horns to the whitewashed wall and the horns supported the guns. They were of various sorts. Four-pound elephant-guns seldom used now, shotguns and ordinary hunting-guns that took much smaller bullets. Powder horns and pouches for bullets hung from other pegs, above them were Kaffir spears and shields and kerries that had been picked up in the wars and after the attack on the farm. In the eyes of her mind she saw them yet as they had been brought in, dark with the blood of the dead. Extensions of their persons, which had come in where they never came, to dwell among them. If they had won they would have come in too in the hands of the killers and left with them when the killing was done. Instead they were here, testaments of that yesterday and would remain, living as it were, in the to-morrows which went beyond her life.

Jacoba believed in the God of the Dutch Reformed Church—a very great and powerful deity. This was the God she worshipped, but somehow life on the frontier made her aware of something else, of some force that the predicants could not explain, but which the Kaffirs understood when they feared to die without issue, without boys to pray, to sacrifice, to intercede with the spirits, and then to breed themselves in the same manner as their fathers and grandfathers before them. She saw life as a strange pattern, not of individual souls but of groups, of families, of clans. This was her clan that she had raised. This was their castle. Their home. Their fortress. The great womb that had borne the fruit of the family tree, the place where her own womb and others before hers had acted as servants to the general increase. The farm or group of farms as it now was, was a living thing—a collection of men, women, children, cattle, horses, ostriches, poultry, dogs, sheep, goats, pigs and servants held together by her will. Its buildings and lands were alive like flesh and blood, bearing their crops and

sheltering the stock and the people. Beyond these twenty thousand morgen lay the outer world of other men, of politics, of the English whom she disliked, and the city men of her own race whom she liked only a little better. This boy, this Simon van der Berg, was the first man from a city she had ever seen of whom she approved. A boy who not only had good manners but who could also ride a horse and handle a gun. She had seen him do both. She had seen him inspan and drive her husband's oxen. So although he was a painter and came from town he was also a man. One who must have spent much time in the country to be able to clap a great sixteen-foot driving whip the way he did.

On the whole she was glad he was going because she was afraid he might interest himself in Sybella who swung her hips at him and walked on her toes when she went near him. The girl should be mated soon, and to the man she had in mind. Suppose her husband wanted a picture made of her? She had seen pictures of fruit, of grapes and pears, and wondered if the painter ever took a bite out of one. He might, but certainly one of them would never get up off the plate and put itself between his lips. One never got up and crept into his bed. She felt herself smiling. Sybella was like what she had been at fifteen, eager, ambitious, full of life and ready to spend it—to buy or to trade blood for laughter, and trade laughter for tears. She was glad he was going soon. Simon van der Berg disturbed her.

Ja, Sybella was a good girl, if there was such a thing any more than there was a good heifer or mare. By good you meant that they were tame, came when you called them, would follow on a riem or drive with reins. That was good. Bid-dable. But there was more than that. There was the reality that went on behind all this, the urges that drove the stock to find new pastures, to seek special herbs or salt in the pans, to seek mates.

But she was a girl who, though obedient and docile, was yet

bold, one who would get her own way while seeming to obey. One who would go far. The best that the family had bred so far with more bottom than any of her other children. It was a pity that she was not a boy. But married to Botha another six thousand morgen would be added to their holdings, and her children would strengthen the border. It was a good thing she had seen so little of Simon van der Berg.

But Sybella had her own ideas about what was right and proper. It might not be proper to desire Simon to take her in his arms and kiss her and that was to be just the beginning. Once he held her she would see to the rest. No, this was not proper but it was right. She was nearly sixteen now, of an age to marry, and this was the man she was going to have though at the moment he did not know it, and it did not seem easy, or even possible. He had refused to paint her portrait when she has asked him, and he was going away. Drifting toward the north, toward adventure. His intention was to paint and trade his way. That was what she wanted—not only the boy of her choice, but adventure and the life that he had chosen. One thing she would not do was to settle down with a local Boer, some neighbouring farmer, however wide his lands and deep his pockets. Since she had failed temporarily with Simon she would find some other young man who wanted a wife to take into the wilds with him. This would be no great problem since quite a few young men from nearby were going north. It only remained for her to make her choice, her second choice, and then persuade her parents to let her go, which they might well do if she claimed no dowry. After all it was her mother who had, from her very babyhood, put such ideas into her head with her frontier tales.

She smoothed her apron over her hips and wished that Simon could see her. See me as I really am, she thought, underneath all these petticoats and skirt. See me as Kattie my maid

THE MATRIARCH

sees me, slim, sleek, strong as a buck to run and leap. She thought how lucky she was to be like her ma in size, to be small and swift and not like the others of her family—great stout girls like Flemish mares, like heavy cows, strong, slow, serious and gravid, seeing nothing out of their large grey-blue eyes.

She was dark, quite different from her father's people and her quick dark roving eyes missed nothing; seeing things, and then hiding behind the dropping lashes that fell over cheeks the colour of ripe apricots. Her hands and feet were small, her legs slim, but she could ride and shoot and cook and sew. And everything she did she did fast, nervously, almost furiously, as if she was a pot just coming to the boil and ready to spill over.

An idea came to her, flying into her mind like a bird into the sky. See her? Why not? She knew where he swam in the river. Well she would swim there too. Why not? How was she supposed to know where he swam except that she had sent Kattie to look secretly.

Kattie had come back with a full description. Very full.

"You must have been very close," she said.

"Ja, mistress, I was close. You said you wanted to know where he bathed. But it seemed to me that what you really wanted to know was if he was well formed."

"I just wanted to know where he swam," Sybella said. And then she said, "And is he?"

"Ja, very. He is beautiful in all his ways."

"And you know these things."

Kattie laughed. "Ja, mistress, that is where a poor coloured girl without shoes to her feet can be better off than her rich mistress with a dress of silk." Kattie had switched her skirt and giggled.

Now the big difficulty would be to make Kattie bathe with her. The two of them going together would make it proper. She called, "Kattie?"

"Ja, missus."

THE MASK

"Kattie, we are going to bathe in the river."

"When?"

"Now."

"We cannot go now. He will be there. A little later on, we could go."

"And you are afraid?"

"For a man to see me like that? Oh my. Shame, missus. Shame indeed to suggest such a thing."

"But you say you have . . . that you know."

"Oh, that is not the same. It is in the dark or nearly dark and he is not looking. Oh, to look is shameful."

"We are going," Sybella said. "Get the towels. As he is such a gentleman, when he comes and sees us there he will go away."

"You mean he will not look, missus? What do you think is the matter with him? Do you think he can see two such mooi meisies—one white and one brown every day? And him a painter who it is said has painted pictures of naked ladies in Kapstadt."

"He will not look," Sybella said. "At least we shall not see him looking. He will hide like the elders who watched Susannah bathe, in the Bible."

"Missus," Kattie said, "it is in my heart you wish this young man to see you naked."

"How can you say such a wicked thing?" Sybella said. Then the two girls fell into each other's arms laughing.

Simon van der Berg was getting ready to leave the farm. He had been here two months. He had painted the old man's wagon and he still laughed about it to himself. He had painted pictures of his house, and his wagon, and his oxen. He had painted his portrait. Then when he wanted ten more like it, one for each of his children, Simon had said, no, I must be moving on.

THE MATRIARCH

"But it's work," the old man had said. "It must be easier just to copy."

"Meneer," Simon said, "would you be wanting to shoot one kind of buck every day at the same range?" Hunting was Schalk's madness.

"I see what you mean," he said.

Then he suggested that he paint Sybella.

"Because she is so beautiful, Meneer?" Simon asked.

"Ja, that is why. And the best beloved. The wildest, the most like my good wife when I married her."

"And you would have the others know this? No, Meneer, I must paint them all or none, for to do her alone would make bad blood and cause great dissension." He leaned forward and said, "There is something else, in addition, Meneer. I am too young to be left alone with such a pretty flower. I might be tempted to pluck it for my buttonhole."

"To tell you truth I should not mind," the old man said. "Indeed I think that was what was in my mind when I suggested it."

"Oupa," Simon said, "is that a nice thing to say—that you had in your heart that I should seduce your daughter?"

The old man said, "I think there would have been two of you in it, for she watches whenever you move. When you are out she watches the windows and the door."

Then there had been talk of payment. Ten English guineas had been decided upon. Also a young red roan stallion he had taken a fancy to and Wagter, a big rough-haired, yellow Boer pup that had taken a fancy to him.

There was no secret about Simon's plans. At King Williamstown he would buy a wagon and a span of oxen, load up with trade goods and work his way to the distant North. He would paint as he went along taking his time and observing the country and the people. He had chosen to do it this way because they built the best wagons in all Africa at King

THE MASK

Williamstown, and by painting his way up there with his servants for company he would have an interesting time and accumulate further capital for investment in trade goods. He had not wanted to take too much from his father because he felt he had been wrong in leaving him. Wrong to his father to leave. Wrong to himself to stay.

"I will be back," he had told his father. "Ja, I will come back a man. It is not good for a boy to work only with his father and live only at his side."

His father had agreed with him in his mind, but not in his heart. So their minds were one but their hearts cried out at the separation.

All this was in his head as he walked slowly toward the bend of the river where there was a deep pool and a rock from which one could dive into the clear cool water. It was an ideal place, screened from the rest of the world by bush and reeds, the only company being the water birds, the snake birds and coots and herons. He went down the little path that wound its way through the tunnel of bush that bordered the river and was about to part the tall reeds that grew on the bank when he heard laughter—girls' laughter. There should be no girls here. He looked down at the path. There was fresh spoor there. Girls' spoor. One was shod and one barefooted. How stupid of him not to have noticed it before. It just showed his pre-occupation with his plans. He ought to go back but he wanted to look, to see; after all had they not spoiled his bathe? Should they not pay something? It would reward him and cost them nothing. He wondered what they were doing. Paddling in the water—fishing? He parted the curtain of reeds and saw Sybella naked, poised on the diving rock, curved with outstretched hands to plunge. As he watched she leaped upward and forward, entering the water like an otter with hardly a splash. His mind held her. Held her dark hair shining with water on her shoulders, her breasts pointed and hard-tipped with the

THE MATRIARCH

chill of the stream, her belly smooth and flat as a boy's. The coloured girl, a little pale bronze figure, sat on the rock dangling her toes in the water. Simon found he did not regret missing his bathe, and was glad that he never moved without his sketch-book. For an hour he sat and drew.

Suddenly the girls came together on the rock and sitting side by side, began to dry themselves, talking, laughing, twittering like birds. Then they got up, seemed to look toward him, laughed and walked upstream, jumping from boulder to boulder. Suppose they had not done that. Suppose they had decided to return the way they had come, and had caught him. How lucky he had been.

In her room half an hour later Sybella said, "Well, I enjoyed our swim, Kattie, did you?"

"It was very cold, missus."

"Ja, it was cold but he saw us. He watched for an hour. He must have thought us beautiful."

"All maids are beautiful to a young man," Kattie said. "Fat or thin, they all have that which he wants."

"We have more. And now he will never forget me."

"How do you know he was there?"

"The birds. There is a bulbul's nest just near where he stood in the reeds. They kept trying to feed their young and turning back. You know, I think he made pictures of us. If only we could see his book."

"Perhaps we can steal it."

"Yes, borrow it and put it back."

"While he eats," Kattie said.

"You could get it. We could look at it and then you could put it back."

"Then we would know," Kattie said.

Sybella said, "Yes." But she knew she would know more than that. She would know how he saw her. Tell from the

drawing if there was lust in his hand, if he longed to touch what he portrayed.

No one could have called her immodest. But she wore her modesty like a garment, which she would discard when the moment came. She had her mother's realism. She had lived her life on a farm, not only among animals but among natives and coloured servants who had no such scruples about the satisfaction of their desires. She knew her own desire as a young female. She knew where she wanted it to end and she knew the man. This was her man and she knew how to paint her picture on his soul. On his eyes, so that if he saw another she would still be there, indelible, for he would have seen her naked, and the other—when he thought of her that way—would merge into her; into his hands that had drawn her, for she knew that he had done so, so that if they touched another they had touched her first with the point of the pencil that was a part of himself.

She knew what she had done and was not ashamed, only a little surprised that her mind should be so clear, so unhesitant about the road she must follow. This was not thought. I did not do what I wanted to do, though I wanted to do it. I did what I had to do. She began to sing loudly, clearly, like a bird in the spring, like a bird calling to its mate.

He was going, but somehow she would find him again. Somehow their lives would be intertwined, twisted together like a trellis into a double thong.

Simon was much disturbed by what he had seen and done. The gentleman in him at war with the artist. His honour at war with his manhood. What he had seen was a revelation of God, of God's greatest creation, of its greatest beauty, in the perfection of the young female form lovely and at play, sparkling with the water of the river. Girls wringing water out of their long hair, running their hands over their smooth thighs

and bellics. Works of God. But from another point of view, that of his religious upbringing, works of the devil. He had drawn women before with his friend the Frenchman, but they were coloured girls of the town. Pretty enough, but bruised and coarsened with usage. They were the vegetables as it were from the kitchen of intercourse. Here were the fragrant flowers.

It was certainly time he left. Soon it would be too late. It must be at once, for in his mind he knew that the girls knew he had seen them, had indeed gone to bathe in that place for this purpose, just to tease him.

He knew even better two hours later, when, coming back to his room, he found his sketchbook gone. They had stolen it to see.

Well, let them see. Let them see what an artist saw in a woman's body, its curves, its voluptuous folds, the play of light and shadow on its nakedness. Let them see what the man saw and the artist portrayed. In some of the sketches he had been all artist, in others less so. Some were specialised as to anatomical detail. Well, they had asked for it. He only hoped they brought it back.

He thought he heard someone outside on the stoep and hid behind the great closet. A dark hand stole over the window sill, a pretty brown girlish arm appeared as Kattie stretched to put down the book. Before she could get away he had seized her wrist. She stifled a scream. With good fortune he would drag her into the room and take her. That would be something to tell her young mistress.

Simon dragged her in. He said, "So you took my book."

Kattie said, "It was just to look. My mistress said we are being spied upon but let us act as if we do not know, and then we shall be safe, for if some miscreant thinks we know he is there he will surely kill us. So let us disport ourselves in all innocence."

"Those postures were not very innocent."

"Oh baas," Kattie said, "we were just playing as girls play alone." She let her long eyelashes fall, masking her eyes, and came closer to him, "—playing the way young girls do," she said again, pressing herself against him.

Simon moved away. He had no desire for her. "And did you like the pictures?"

"Man," Kattie said, "I had no idea we were so beautiful. Like angels."

Simon gave her a slap on her behind and said, "Run along now and tell your mistress she is the most beautiful and most naughty girl I ever saw. Tell her that it is not right to tempt young guests at her house."

"I will tell her," Kattie said, "and she will be so happy."

"Happy?"

"That you were tempted. Oh master," she clapped her hands and laughed, "is it not wonderful what we can do with our bodies?" She laughed again and slipped out of the door.

Schalk Fourie—the *Oubaas*, or *Oupa* as he was called, was sorry young Simon was leaving. He was a truly skilful young man with his paints and he could hardly keep his eyes off the picture he had painted of the *plek*, the homestead, with his span of oxen, the blue painted wagon with yellow wheels and new white tent that covered it. It was beautiful. Each ox could be recognised, for though they were all red, all as alike as peas in a pod to a stranger he knew them all by their faces, by the different curves of their horns, their way of walking and carrying themselves. Then he had made him put in his black horse, General, and two of the dogs. He could even recognise the three white geese that always stayed near homestead, the muscovy ducks and the black and red gamecock that an Englishman he had once gone hunting with had given him. Not that cock, but one of its descendants. This English-

man, who had been passing through just when he had been going out hunting, had asked if he could accompany him. He had been a strange but interesting person. Forever washing and shaving and with curious habits of hygiene. They had spent a month up country with an old Boer friend of his, a lonely old widower who was not rich enough to get a new wife to share his hardships. A young poor man could get a woman but an old one must be rich. That is to say, that a woman had to be bought, be paid for with young hot blood or old money among white men—and a bride price or lobola of cattle among the Kaffirs. Schalk had killed many Kaffirs, a hundred perhaps, but had no great hatred of them. Savages who killed and tortured. But what would you expect of them? Nor were they hard to defeat in open country by riding round them, charging up to them, firing from your horse just out of spear range, and then swerving away. There was even no great risk unless your horse fell. The danger was at night when they might attack the laager, usually just before dawn, or in bush country, or where there were many stones and horses could not swerve or gallop.

His mind went back to the picture again, to the game fowl that Englishman had given him. He was an officer who had sent such fowls from India where he had served to other friends. He said, "These birds will fight the hawks when they come to take the chicks. The hens fight like cocks, and the cocks will fight anything—jackal, wildcats. Fight till they are killed, for they are bred for this purpose and fight each other for wagers wearing needle spurs of steel." Schalk had heard of this but not believed it, yet when a year later these Indian birds arrived he saw that it was true, for in two days not a barnyard cock was left alive. This man, Captain Jackson his name was, had told him of hunting tigers in India, shooting them from the backs of tame elephants. The elephants were not like those to be found here and the tigers were larger than

lions and more fierce and had stripes instead of spots like the African tigers upon their yellow skins that were of a rich colour, almost red, like the chestnut of a horse. He had much enjoyed Captain Jackson's conversation. As well as the Indian chickens he had given him a long-barrelled English rifled gun that killed at great range but could not be used mounted as it was hard to load. In fact, until young Simon van der Berg had come along he had not met Captain Jackson's equal for talk. Not that young Simon talked much of hunting but he knew a great deal about horses and horse breeding. His father bred race horses and cavalry mounts in a farm he had in the mountains on the Bredasdorp coast. He was related to many men he knew or knew of, such families as the Melks, the Cloetes, the van der Byls, the van Bredas, the van Recnens, with some of whom he was himself even distantly connected.

Windvoel, the roan stallion he had in part payment for his work, was a good horse that would stand to be shot over and gallop after a wounded buck, hunting it like a dog. He would certainly miss the boy and that little girl of theirs, Sybella, would miss him even more. Magtig, if she was a filly they'd have to watch the gate of her kraal when that one left for if they took their eyes off her for a moment she would be up to it and over, showing a very pretty pair of heels to any who was there to see. It was a pity it could not be, but the young man was adventure bound, his mind on the far mountains rather than the breasts of a girl or the softness of her thighs, and Jacoba had marked her down for Botha. A fine man with three farms but old for her, more than twice her age, with two wives dead and eight children alive—some older than she was. But that was Jacoba's mind and so it would happen. Sometimes he wondered about Jacoba, for once she had been like Sybella, soft, yielding, amorous, beautiful, her face lighting up when she saw him. How they had loved in their youth more than thirty years ago! But slowly over the years she had

hardened, toughened. The wars that had swept over them, the deaths, accidents, hardships and perils, had eaten into her until nothing was left but hardness. Thirteen children was a great number. Few women had so many and survived, or if they did they were empty of life, used up by the weight that life had thrust upon them, the liberties that life had taken with them. But she was not like that. Each pregnancy, each birth, each death, each disaster, had coated her heart with another sheath of metal, her body with another skin of leather, her muscles with new strengths of whipcord, her will with more iron. So that to-day she was no longer a woman, no longer his wife but a force, a female thing that ruled these farms, her children and himself.

Now there was little pleasure to be had by him except in hunting. It was a hard thing to say, very hard, and ungodly, but it might have been better if the Almighty had not made her so strong, so brave, more virile than a man, better if He has taken her to rest in His bosom many years ago and allowed him to replace her with a younger woman with flesh on her bones, and tears in her eyes, and love in her heart.

3. The Hunt

THE DAY after Simon left Schalk Fourie mounted his blue hunting-pony Papegaai and rode off to hunt. Some people laughed at him for riding a mare, one that had three foals at that, but he said she was steadier than a stallion for shooting, and that the proof of this pudding was the game he brought in. She was small, only fourteen two, but short coupled and strong, with a nice shoulder. Her colour was iron grey with darker spots and blotches which was why he called her parrot. The hairs over her body were mouse-coloured, darkening on her legs, which gave her that grey appearance that the Boers call blue.

Schalk sat very straight in the saddle, riding with long stirrup leathers and his feet well forward almost brushing the mare's elbows. He carried his gun, bullets, powder, caps, a water gourd bound with leather, some rusks and biltong in a small bag, and a rolled kaross of silver jackal skins, in which to sleep, on the back of his saddle. Thus equipped he could stay out on the veld comfortably enough for a week or more.

He was glad to get away. He missed having that young painter to talk to and could not stand Sybella's tear-stained face, for now that he had left, she made no more pretences. She was unable to. She wanted him. She was in love with him and her heart was broken. Not that he had done anything. He had not seduced her or led her on. On the contrary, he had even refused to paint her but this had of course made her all

THE HUNT

the more keen to get him. That was her mother's blood showing—her necessity to master, to possess. It was the same kind of fury which arose in her breast when thwarted! But there was nothing he could do about it. The boy had expressed no interest in her. And her mother had her earmarked, like a calf, for their neighbour Jan Botha's kraal.

Botha is much too old for her, he thought again, but he had three fine farms. They cut into the family properties on the west. With them in their possession the family and its near connections would control an enormous block of land. That was what Jacoba saw in her mind. Not a young girl in an old man's bed but a map of properties tied by kinship of blood and marriage, which she could dominate. This had been her life's ambition. She was a woman consumed by what some men considered the Boer disease of land hunger. She must own as far as she could see. To her the smoke of a stranger's fire was anathema.

That was what the scene had been about. Not the boy, but Jacoba's insistence on Sybella's marriage to Jan Botha as soon as possible, after this present nonsense, which if it did nothing else had showed the girl to be ready for marriage.

With the house in such a turmoil, with sulks on the one side, and screaming invective on the other, with two natures so similar in quality and so utterly opposed in purpose, there was no peace to be found, so the sensible thing had been to get on his blue pony and ride out into the veld where the world was sane and silent, except for the cries of the birds and animals.

He watched a pair of tall secretary birds stride with long steps over the rough ground. Grey, long-legged hawks with black wings. They had touches of red on their faces and the plumes that gave them their names stuck out behind their ears like the pen of a clerk in an office.

Overhead five cranes flew very high. He would not have noticed them if they had not given their loud croaking cry. He

pulled up his mare to enjoy the scene, the stillness, the beauty of a world untouched so far by man. The world as God's hand had left it, like a clay vase on the potter's wheel of its Creator. Here you could see God's design, the intricacies of His pattern on the rocks and hills, on the bush, the grass and trees, on the birds and beasts. Schalk breathed deeply of the air scented by the aromatic herbs crushed beneath his horse's hoofs. Sometimes he wished he could always live like this. Like a strand-looper or trek-Boer—a masterless, homeless wanderer, a nomad like those people in the Bible who drift through its pages with their flocks and herds, begetting and being begotten.

When he had been a boy it had been in his mind to hunt and explore in the north, to follow Coenrad Buys and the other adventurers who had left the colony to escape the British, the Law, the trammels of civilisation. Later he would have liked to join the Great Trek but by that time he was thirty-six, married to Jacoba, many times a father, and nothing would ever make her give up the family place that had come to her or leave her brothers. Even then she had been acquiring more land, more farms and putting in Bywoners and cousins to run them. Already her mind ran to solid property, to reality, not to dreams of a fabulous North which could never come up to what she now held in her hand.

"The North," she had almost spat at him, "is for poor men, failures, criminals and tactless fools who cannot live within the law. The British may be bad but the North with its dangers, discomfort and savage Kaffirs will be worse. The Kaffirs there—Zulus under Mosilikatze and Chaka—are more savage than those we have here. Though God knows they are bad enough." That was after they had fought them off here on the farm.

And she was right. To fight Kaffirs a fortified farm was better than a wagon laager, but somehow he had wanted the adventure of it. In his mind and heart he thought of his people carving out a new empire. He thought of the birth of a

nation in the Free State, and across the Vaal. That was where young Simon was going. "I have relations who went up there," he had said, "and I will find men who knew them. That is my destination." That had been one of the things that had attracted him to the boy who now, so many years later when his own dream had been forgotten, was going to make it live again.

The little mare moved daintily, picking her way, with pricked ears looking from right to left as if she too was a hunter. In a way she was, for so well trained was she that if she saw a buck she would swing to the side and stand still so that her rider could shoot over her near shoulder. With a steady pony there was no difficulty in shooting from the saddle. A wounded buck she would follow as swiftly as a hound. As soon as the shot was fired she was off from a stand into a gallop after the wounded beast, following its every twist and turn, so that a man must be a good rider to sit in his saddle as she galloped with the reins loose upon her neck. A word was enough to stop her if there was a chance for a second shot. And when dismounted she would stand, as long as the reins were thrown over her head, to let her master kill with his long hunting-knife, and clean and quarter whatever he had shot.

But like most horses she was not steady with lions or tigers. Boers, when they hunted them in company, tied the horses' heads together so that they could not stampede or if alone tied the horse's head to their belts with a riem so that they could mount again and get away quickly as soon as they had fired. Even the skins of these great cats were hard to load on a horse, the feral smell of their bodies being enough to send them plunging and rearing into the air.

But of the many horses Schalk had ever used for hunting this little blue mare was the best. He leaned forward and patted her sleek, hard neck.

"You are a pretty thing," he said. "You are like a little

wife. Round and plump and able to do all that is asked of you. No longer a silly, long-legged, shy young girl or an old woman fit for work alone. Ja, magtig," he said, "you are just right for both work and pleasure."

He tightened his single rein, pressed his knees into the saddle and leaned forward. Given the signal Papegaai was off. Her mane and tail flowing, her long forelock flying back over her head between her ears like a plume. She scampered over rock outcrops unslipping on her unshod hoofs, she jumped low bushes, she swerved round the bigger ones. Her nostrils were wide open and red as she snorted with pleasure, her big protuberant eyes rolled showing their whites as she tossed her head and shook the bit in her mouth so that the curb chain rattled. The old man and the young mare were happy, alive in God's world, at one with each other, in their pleasure at the gallop, at the breeze they had made themselves pulling at their hair, at the sweet fresh air they breathed, at the hammer of the hoofs on the ground and the creak of the saddlery as it took up the strain of their motion.

They galloped a mile or so between low limestone hills and folds in the ground that were like the pleats of a great green cloth and then Schalk pulled the little mare up at the top of a small rise, where she stood blowing out her nostrils and arching her neck. Schalk swept off his hat and sucked the air into his lungs. He was fifty-one but he had seldom felt better, stronger, happier. This was necessary to him, to do what he was doing now, to get away. It seemed to him that he was nearer to God here than when he prayed in the great room at home, or out of doors at nagmaal. He was a good Christian, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, but in his secret heart he felt that there were some things the predicans did not know about God. With all their education and civilised way of life some things were not clear to them which every farmer knew, whether he was ready to acknowledge it or not.

THE HUNT

Below him there was a little pool of brown water surrounded by low reeds. Blue water lilies bloomed among the plate-shaped leaves in its centre. A smoky bald-headed coot swam undisturbed among them. The mare could drink here. He rode down, dismounted and took the bit out of her mouth. She sucked up the water in great gulps, her nostrils above its surface. Then when she had done he took off her saddle and still holding the reins he let her roll in the sand that edged the little pool. She rolled first on one side then on the other, grunted, lay on her back kicking her feet in the air, swung round getting up on her forelegs, sitting up almost like a man, and then came to her feet. Now she shook herself like a dog with her neck straight out and blew from her nostrils. Then she stood still as if to say: *I feel fine now. I am refreshed. Shall we go on?* Schalk saddled her again. Patted her neck and swung up. Letting the reins lie on her withers as he lit his pipe.

He smoked quietly, enjoying the peace and stillness that surrounded him as if it were water. Then, knocking out his pipe, he rode on. Now he was looking for a buck to shoot for his supper. His gun lay across his knees. Papegaai was alert, moving her head from side to side. Then he saw what he wanted. A little steenbok ram not as big as a pointer with black needle horns and great ears like wings peering at him out of the grass. The horse had seen it as quickly as he, and swung away from it before he had time to touch the rein. He raised his gun and fired. The buck rolled over, kicking its tiny sharp black hoofs in the air and thrashing the dry grass in its final agony.

Throwing the reins over the pony's head Schalk dismounted and went to the buck. He cut its throat and watched the blood pour out in a thick dark stream. Then he skinned the forehand leaving the saddle and hind legs. He put the liver back on the half empty skin and tied the whole into a parcel, wrapping

the skin of the forelegs round those of the hind and cutting a space behind the tendon of the hock so that he could tie the meat on to his saddle with the little rawhide thong he carried for the purpose to the dees.

Now he mounted again and looked for a place to sleep. He soon found one. There was a nice thick bush growing near a small limestone ~~hammock~~ that had been sheared off by some accident of nature into a miniature cliff. There was water nearby—a small spring—and plenty of wood.

He off-saddled, knec-haltered the mare and collecting some dry sticks struck his flint and steel to the kindling he carried. Slowly he built up his fire with bits of grass and tiny twigs, gradually increasing their size till he had a good blaze. When it burned down to glowing coals he would be able to grill his buck liver. This, with salt, rusks and water, was all he wanted for a meal.

The strand wolf or striped hyena, rather bigger and more savage than its spotted cousin, had seen the man mounted on a grey horse. It had stood still, skulking by two high rocks, hidden in the cleft between them, watching with dark sullen eyes. The wolf was hungry. Two days ago it had been driven from a sheep it had killed by a coloured herder and his dogs. Since then it had not eaten. It could go longer without food, much longer—a week or more—even two weeks without dying, but each day made it more savage, more dangerous, though later weakened by hunger its rage would be less dangerous than now, when it was in its full strength.

These great hyenas are called beach or strand wolves by the Boers because they tended to roam along the coastal shores looking for dead fish, or birds or bodies washed up by the waves of the Southern seas, but they will kill too, kill anything weak, young, sick or wounded or helpless. They once ranged the whole of Africa from north to south and from east to west, but

THE HUNT

are rare to-day, for war was declared against them as stock killers as bad as any lion or tiger, and worse than jackals. Having seen the man and the horse, the wolf followed them at a safe distance never showing himself. When he heard the shot fired he came closer and smelled the blood. These animals know the sound of a shot. Know it means death and that death means oilal. So when Schalk camped for the night and knee-haltered his mare to graze, the wolf was nearby. If the man had had his dogs with him they would have given him warning—or his little bushman whose eyes and nose nothing could escape, would have spotted it. As it was, Schalk knew nothing and the mare grazing away from him upwind showed no fear.

The wolf weighed two hundred pounds and stood a full thirty inches at the shoulder. It was dark brown in colour and striped with blackish sepia markings. Its jaws were so strong that it could crack bones a lion left when he abandoned his kill. Following the mounted man it ate the guts of the buck he had shot—just one warm delicious mouthful. It crunched the buck's small head, spitting out the black needle horns and continued on the horse's spoor. If it came across the saddle in the night it would eat that too. There was no limit to its voracity. Harness, boots, dry skins. Nothing was too hard or too tough except a skull of an animal so big it could not get it into the pincers of its jaws—a bull's skull or a man's.

Moving slowly on it found a nesting pheasant—a francolin, and pounced like a cat upon it. It went down with one gulp. Then the wolf swallowed the eggs, taking them into its mouth one at a time, raising its head and crunching the shell.

It remained unsatisfied, it could have eaten a whole sheep, skin, bones and all, before it was replete. It dropped its dark nose to the spoor again. It was tied to the spoor by the string of its hunger. This invisible hunger held it to the horse as if it was lashed there, tied by a chain to the horse's tail. It would

THE MASK

follow it as sharks follow a slave ship, knowing that there will be scraps and perhaps more thrown over the side.

When he had finished eating, Schalk went out to look at his horse. She was grazing near by. He patted her strong quarters and then arranged his bed. He fixed the saddle for a pillow, scraped out a hollow for his thigh, spread his kaross with the fur inward, laid his loaded gun beside him, checked the buck meat that was safely hung out of reach of anything in the tree by which he was sleeping and lay down with his feet toward the dying glow of the fire.

There was no moon, so the stars were extra bright in the deep blue velvet of the sky. For a while he lay on his back staring up at them, wondering at their numbers, at their meaning, at the mysteries of God.

All this the strand wolf had seen and smelt. The raw meat wrapped in its own skin, the liver cooking, the smell of man, of his horse, of sweat and leather. A whole galaxy of smells that created for the beast a picture, a prism of bright odours in a scent-world unknown to man. Each had its value, its importance, its own significance. When the man slept the wolf moved nearer. Very quietly, like a moving shadow, for so big a beast. It would have seized the horse if the man had not been there, but it had some experience of men, so it moved toward the meat smell. Its nose was pointed upward to where it hung in the tree. The great slaver jaws were half open, the teeth showed white in the starlight, its almost circular eyes glinted with a milky purple light.

If the man had not been lying below the tree it might have reached the meat with a kind of running leap that would have taken it, half climbing, up the trunk. It came closer, closer. The meat smell was maddening it. Saliva dripped from its mouth. It came forward and went back soundlessly,

THE HUNT

still like a shadow but a shadow that smelled of death and putrefaction. In his sleep the man smelled it, felt danger, half-woke and groped for the gun at his side.

Knowing its chance was gone, that the man was waking, that he was moving, the hyena snapped at him as it swung away from the tree. Its great jaws closed over his face. It took his nose, his upper lip, its incisors scraped his cheek-bones. In one swallow the man's face had gone. Gone before he had time to scream, and the wolf was thirty yards away sitting waiting in the dark shadow of a rock.

Schalk woke in agony. Screaming he put his hands to his face. The hot blood poured over them and ran down his neck and chest as he tried to rise. He knew what had happened. With part of his mind detached as it were from the present he thought, *If I had only brought my bushman boy, or some of the dogs.* That he, the great hunter, the lover of the bush, should be caught like this. He knew what he would look like if he lived. He had seen others who had been bitten by wolves in the face. Faceless men, the whole mask of their countenance removed, leaving only red tissue, the white bone of their skulls and the bared fangs of their teeth set in exposed gums. Men from whom even their own children ran in fright. Then he fainted.

If the wolf had not eaten the guts, the forehead and head, of the buck Schalk had shot, it might have closed in now and finished him, but the worst of its hunger, the dangerous sharp edge of it, had been calmed. It still feared man so it sat and watched. Then realising that he was in no condition to defend his horse it sprang at the near hind leg of the knee-haltered mare, which with its head tied to its leg below the knee could not even defend itself with its heels, much less run away. With one crunch the leg was smashed below the hock, ground to pulp between those terrible jaws, then the mare went down and

the wolf was at its throat. Its chattering excitement was soon answered by others of its kind who arrived to share the feast. Schalk knew what had happened. He had come to now. He knew Papegaai was dead, that he was badly wounded, weak, and twenty miles from home. The eastern sky was paling with the coming dawn. He thanked God that his eyes had been spared, that he could still see, but the pain was almost unendurable though the blood had almost ceased to flow and was coagulating. His shirt front and trousers were dark with blood, his hands and arms still sticky with it. His gun was safe. He went down to the water to wash his hands and drink. It was here he got his first glimpse of his countenance, of a flat sort of red plate out of which his blue eyes stared, that ended in a grey beard tufted with hard black blood. He washed his hands, his neck, his beard. He drank water and refilled his gourd. Then kneeling by the water he prayed to God for strength to get home, for courage to bear the life he must now lead, and to thank God that things were not worse, that he still lived, that he had been made so strong, so powerful.

Then he turned his face south, toward home and safety. As he rounded a low hill he saw the wolves still eating what was left of his mare. They had torn out her belly, the underside of her neck, and were working from the inside toward her back and quarters. They still tore, screamed and gave their barking laugh. Raising his gun he fired and brought one down. The others slunk away with their dragging walk as if they were lame, looking back over their shoulders at him with big, round, blank eyes. Perhaps the mare was luckier than he. Perhaps it was better to be dead.

He walked on, staggering a little. And this was only the beginning. Twenty miles was an easy walk in a day for a strong man, but he would not make it in a day. He walked for two hours and then stopped to rest and drink water. He

THE HUNT

soaked some rusks in his beaker, he shaved some biltong into thin strips and swallowed them whole. Then he lay exhausted, with his back against a tree, his breast rising and falling as he fought for air. He felt sick and his forehead was sweating. He was going to faint again.

By nightfall he had done five miles and had abandoned his gun. By nightfall his face was flyblown. All day the flies had been on his face, a black fur of hungry flies feeding on his flesh and laying their eggs. Schalk knew what was happening. He had seen it with enough stock—wounded cattle and fly-blown sheep. Finding some water he splashed it up at himself, but it was not enough. He knew it was not enough. A fever began to burn him.

4. The Wagon

ON THE farm preparations were being made for nagmaal. Once in three months all the families in the district gathered together in the village of Bloempan to pray, to sing praises to the Lord their God, to receive communion and finally to exchange gossip, to trade, to court, dance and make love. These festivities and ceremonies were the hub of the wheel of their separate lives. The point where the widely separated spokes were joined in unity of worship and social intercourse. This was what made them different from the trek-Boers who lived wild nomadic, unsettled lives.

The journey by wagon took five days and pleasant days they were, trekking easily fifteen or so miles a day from one known outspan to another, revisiting four times a year streams and rivers, pans, trees and rocks that had become old friends so that even the working oxen, dogs and saddle-horses knew them.

Tanta Jacoba was getting things ready—the food and drink—sausages, biltong, rice, bread, rusks, cakes, konfyts of watermelon and orange, bottles of home-distilled peach brandy, white as water and strong as tiger's milk. There was poultry to be caught for later killing, bedding to prepare, bucksails to rig as tents; cook pots and beakers, cups, plates and cutlery must be collected and packed.

There was a routine to it since it occurred with each changing

THE WAGON

season, but since, like the seasons, no two of which are ever quite the same, there was no set plan. So everyone was busy on the farm doing one thing or another. Sybella was collecting eggs and hard boiling them, seeing that her prettiest dresses were washed and ironed and getting out her most decorated and pleated kappies. She had a project in her mind. This was her chance to find a young man who was willing to adventure in the north and needed a fine brave girl for company. After this, beyond this, she did not think. Only to get to the north where Simon was going. Just to be around in the same part of the world. To have news of him. To see him perhaps. Further than that she did not look. Life was uncertain. So much could happen. This husband whom she had not yet met might die. Be killed by Kaffirs or wild beasts. She might even run away from him to Simon, and of course the possibility remained that she might grow to love this man. For strange things happened with marriages. Strange bonds were formed in bed tying male and female together as surely as two oxen fastened to a yoke. She was not sure if she wanted to go north because Simon was there, or wanted Simon because he was going to the north. All she knew was that she was sick of home with its security, and utterly refused to marry a man as old as Jan Botha however rich he might be. A young girl did not sleep with a farm. It was not a farm that held her in its arms, embraced her, took her in the night and bred her. So with her mind made up in two ways—what she would do and what she would not do—Sybella's heart was high.

Two of her brothers were in the house. They had come to see their father only to find he was away. One of them, Gert, had brought his wife and youngest child to show to Ouma. Sybella thought the child looked like a pig. Its tiny arms were like sausages round which string had been tied indenting them deeply at the joints. Her father's wagon, looking very fine in its new coat of blue paint, wildflowers and yellow wheels, stood in

THE MASK

front of the house. It would create a sensation she was sure. And her father would be pleased. His span of red oxen and his fine wagon, surely the finest for many hundred miles around, would be much talked of.

She thought, he should be back before long now. He had said he was only going for a few days, just to ride over the veld and look at the grazing and the water. He had taken neither Bosman his tame bushman nor other servants. And no dogs, pack-horses or cart, as he did when he hunted for meat in the winter. It was too hot to make biltong now. It would not cure. Somehow Sybella understood her father's desire to get away. To be alone in the wilder parts of the farm that were still untouched by man. But she wondered when he would be back and what tales he would have to tell.

Schalk had ceased to be a man. He was just an idea, a force of will alone, that drove the thing that had been his body toward what his instinct, since his mind had gone in delirium, knew to be his home.

As he walked he staggered, rolling like a drunken man. Near starving now and almost mad for water, seeing the visions of his fever, not reality, he stumbled on. His face dripped pus as the maggots bored into his tissue as they do into the intestines of a flyblown sheep.

In his mind he saw visions. He saw himself young and courting Jacoba. He saw battles of the Kaffir wars, the fight at the farm, raids and commandos. He hunted lions again, he broke horses and was now calling them by name. He picked out oxen in matched spans. He went back to the day he had found Bosman wounded, and instead of killing him as was usual with a bushman had brought him home and tamed him. He saw the cool forest of the coast and the rivers and pans. Because the sun beat down on him so pitilessly he saw coolness and felt it.

THE WAGON

Now he was near the water, now he would drink and bathe. Now Jacoba would come . . . that was when he fell.

Kleinbooï was driving the cattle he was herding to water when he saw the vultures circling. He called a piccanin to see to the stock, and whistling to his dog turned back into the veld. As he watched the number of vultures increased. They came swinging down in wide circles on unmoving wings, carried by the hot air currents that rose from the red oven of the soil. Their pinions were opened at the tips like the fingers of a hand, and curved upward. Their necks were outstretched. Their heads turned this way and that as they watched each other and looked down.

Below them something was dead or dying. A cow, an ox, a horse or a sheep Kleinbooï hurried. What luck that he had seen them first. That he had seen them at all because this was an isolated part of the farm. This meant meat. If an animal was sick it was slaughtered for food. Saliva began to form in his mouth and run out at the corners of his lips. A man could never have meat enough except perhaps in heaven. Ha, he thought, *Meneer Aasvoel*, it is I that will the flesh have. Yes, Mr. Vulture, this time you will go without your supper. Lucky he had an axe with him stuck through his belt. He would cut brush and cover the body with it while he went to get help. The birds would not be able to move the brush. This was a good day indeed.

When Schalk came to he was lying face down on the ground. As he raised himself on hands and knees a great shadow swept past him. A black pool moving over the bare red ground. Others followed in a blur of moving patches, like black tiger spots on a red ground. Then there was a rush of air and beating of great wings as a vulture swept past his head and landed, throwing itself backward. Others joined it. Soon there was a circle of them around him. Like a crowd of ancient men with

their heads sunk into the white frills of their necks, their shoulders hunched as they shuffled forward tentatively. They made no haste for there was none. In God's good time, for these also were God's creatures, he would be theirs. All they need do was to wait. Not till he was dead, but weaker. There was a moment that they well knew from their vast experience and watched for—for these birds were long-lived with a span of forty years or more. In fact, they lived so long that many believed they never died, that living on the dead gave them some kind of immortality.

Soon the circle round the man was outlined with chalky excrement, with feathers torn from the quarrelling birds, a circle that grew ever smaller as birds came nearer. Danger sharpened Schalk's wits. Soon, unless he could do something, they would attack him. First one of the boldest would approach. Then the others, in a grey-brown nauseating wave of raised, beating wings and savage plucking beaks. With raucous cries and croaks they would be over him, on him, tearing him. At his eyes first. That was their custom. Then at his face and his clothes, ripping at them, pulling as if they were skin, to reach at the softest parts of his belly.

It would come soon. He saw their reptilian heads come close, he saw their black-pupiled orange eyes, and then suddenly they grew flustered, turned their heads, flapped their wings, ran clumsily to get the air beneath them, and sailed up into the air—but circling still, so that their black shadows continued to pattern the veld about him with heaving concentric circles. What was coming now? The wolves again? Having finished eating the mare he knew that they were following him. He reached for the knife on his belt. He was not going to be eaten like a sheep. He would die as he had seen lions die, pulled down in the end, in their old age and weakness, by the scavengers who had for so long lived on their leavings. But with some dead around them. Hyenas, vultures, marabou

THE WAGON

storks, jackals. These were the scavengers of the veld, its final masters, for everything fell to them in time.

But it was not that. It was a man. It was Kleinbooï. He was shouting and waving his arms.

"Baas," he said, "Master, is it you?"

"It was a wolf," Schalk said. Then he fainted again.

Kleinbooï gave him water from his bottle, got him on to his feet and then on to his back. His hut was not too far away. Having got him safely on to the pile of skins that was his bed and giving him more water Kleinbooï went for help. The house was eight miles away but meeting another herder on the way he brought him back and, making a rough stretcher out of two bamboo poles and a kudu skin, they put their master upon it and carried him back.

Gert stood beside his mother while Susanna his wife explained the new and diverting tricks that their very fat child had acquired since she had seen him last. Sybella, half listening to the conversation, paid little attention to what was being said. She had heard it all before and would hear it again, over and over again—this woman talk of babies, sickness, death, servants and food. How she wished she was not a woman. That she could do as she wanted like a man. And without a man. Bring a woman meant you could do nothing without a man. You needed him. You worked through him, by him. To get to the North she had to have a man. But if I was a man, she thought. Then she laughed. Ja, magtig, she thought, even to have a baby a woman must have a man.

Her eye was caught by a movement on the veld beyond the walls of the great kraal. Something unusual was taking place. Her eyes were quick to recognise the unusual. The unusual generally meant danger or trouble. One got accustomed to a picture of life in which the various functions of the farm followed each other as day followed night, any vari-

ation at once created a feeling of attention. *A hallo, what's all this about?* feeling, so that if they saw something different, an old man dreaming over his pipe in the sun or a young girl churning butter would go and look themselves or call upon others to go and see.

Vultures in the sky were a portent of death or sickness, a cluster of screaming birds might mean an owl or snake in a tree. The rushing of poultry toward the house would mean a hawk, the actions of a cat could indicate the presence of a puff adder. The special gasping bark of a dog would tell the listener that he had brought something to bay and needed help. The lowing of a cow, the bleat of a sheep, the scream of a stallion, all had their meanings. All were subject to interpretation by people who had lived out their lives on farms and the frontier. They were always alert for a Kaffir raid—a sudden attack—so that though they moved slowly, with what a townsman might consider bucolic calm, such people were actually very alert and as quick to respond to danger as the animals they lived among.

Sybella saw two men carrying a kind of rough stretcher that sagged and swayed as they staggered under its weight.

She put her hand on her mother's arm.

Jacoba looked up from the fat baby and saw the men coming. She remained calm, unmoving. Whatever it was they would soon know. There was no point in going toward them since they were coming here. And whatever it was it must be dealt with here—at the homestead.

Gert, towering over her, stared too, his blue eyes somewhat vacant. He was not a clever man and he was still thinking of the child his wife was holding in her arms. Another son. He was lucky to have three sons. Ideas passed slowly through his mind, one had to fade out before another, growing almost as slowly as a plant in its place.

Sybella was tense. Her hand went to her breast. She could

THE WAGON

feel her heart beating beneath its soft warmth. Still in fear, still nervous of what was coming, as young and frightened as a young horse at some new sight, she experienced some pleasure in the weight and texture of her breast. Its swelling softness proclaimed the life that was in her, burgeoning like a bud, a bud that would one day flower white milk when her body had produced its fruit. The beating of her heart increased till it was a bird fluttering in her bosom, beating its wings against the cage of her hand.

As the men put the stretcher down she screamed, putting her hands up to her mouth and upward to cover her eyes, to hide forever the awful thing that she had seen.

Her mother, hardly turning, slapped her sharply. "Go inside," she said, "go to your room."

Sybella ran away. As she ran she heard it speak. It said, "Thank God, Jacoba, thank God!"

Jacoba said, "Bring him into the voorhuis—the big hall." They carried him in.

"You can go now," she said to the herd boys.

The men who had brought him stood looking at her as if they expected some reward, some thanks at least.

Jacoba said, "Go."

When they had gone she went out to call her other sons. The boys, who were near by, came quickly. Gert lumbered in, followed by Kaspar, Frikkie and Jan. They halted and shrank back when they saw the stretcher.

She said, "Come, we'll put your father on the kartel in the wagon." A mattress lay on a frame of stretched rawhide criss-crossed riems.

"What? Shall we not put him in his room?" Gert said.

"His room?" Jacoba said, "when he stinks like that?"

They picked him up and laid him on the bed in the wagon. Gert got in first and took him up by the shoulders and lifted

THE MASK

him as the others eased him upward. Jan, still almost a child, was crying.

Jacoba said, "Stop making that noise and go and get me two soft riems."

While they waited for him to come back the others stood in a group at the back of the blue wagon. It was early evening and the new snow-white tent glowed with a pink and bloody tinge. The whole world—the white-washed kraals, the bare earth, the dark green trees of the homestead, were all tinged with red highlights. The shadows were lilac and indigo. Everything was very still so that Jan's footsteps when he returned with the riems sounded loud on the hard ground of the yard.

"Now tie his hands," Jacoba said. "Tie them by the wrists to the wagon rails."

"Tie them, Ma?" Gert said.

"Ja," she said.

The boys tied their father's hands. They thought she was going to perform some surgery on the man who lay there moaning. Going to cut away some of the putrid flesh, scrape out the maggots, dress the pus with herbs or even turpentine.

Having tied him they stood back.

"Now go into the house," their mother said, "to my room, and bring down my big feather mattress."

These feather mattresses, stuffed with down that was plucked from the breasts of living geese each year, were a feature of every Boer home.

While the boys left her Jacoba got into the wagon beside her husband, putting her foot on the hub of the low front wheel and then walking back over the bed toward him.

Looking up he recognised her. "Jacoba," he said.

She said nothing, only looked out through the arch of the canvas above her on to the yard and the farm buildings, the place she loved so much that it was her life. Pink-washed with the light of the falling sun, almost red now, it seemed to her

THE WAGON

symbolic, as the purple and black flags of the clouds closed in on the setting sun.

Here were the boys.

"Give it to me," she said. She came to the back of the wagon to take it.

"You are going to cover him, Ma?" Gert said. He thought a blanket would be enough because it was hot and even at night a single blanket was plenty. But there was no doubt that his mother knew best. Kaspar and Frikkie said nothing. They merely stared from their eldest brother to their mother.

"Ja, Gert," she said, "I am going to cover him." She pulled up the mattress—that was like a great comforter two-foot thick. "And now go and call that fat wife of yours."

Gert returned with Susanna.

"Come," Jacoba said, "come all of you. You boys and Susanna. Push her up, Gert." Jacoba put out her hand and dragged in her daughter-in-law.

When they were all on the wagon in front of the kartel, she leaned forward and pulled the mattress over her husband's head. "Now," she said.

Gert said, "Ma! Ma, you are going to suffocate him. Are you trying to make him dead?"

"Sit, you big fool," she said. "Sit, all of you, on his head and shoulders, his chest. You, you big fat stupid cow, the least you can do is press the life out of a man as if he was a cheese." She pushed Susanna down. The baby in her arms began to cry. She sobbed, dropping her tears into its puckered face. The men were stolid. Sitting as they had been told to sit, too astonished to disobey, listening to their mother saying, "What else, you fools? Magtig, is that thing we have below us a man—that mass of pus and maggots and running sores? A man who is undoubtedly mad, and who if he lived would turn everyone's belly who surveyed him? Nee, a man like that is better dead. If I was like that it is what I should wish."

To her, death was better than crippling. She felt it curious that there had been no hesitation in her mind. As soon as she saw him she had known what she must do. It had seemed to her almost as if it had been planned by some higher force, perhaps by God Himself, that the wagon with its bed made up should be there and that her great son and his lump of a wife were here to help her, and now at last the farm would be hers, and the power hers. There would be no more arguments. And by the same act which gave her power she was performing a duty. Love had been gone so long from her heart that she did not remember it. The big young man called Schalk Fourie who had ridden up to court her had been lost in the years. She had forgotten what she had felt—the quickening of her body to his touch, the memory of his lips and hands. For an instant the memories tried to force themselves upward out of the past that had overlaid them, like diamonds shining in a river bed under the mud of the floods that covered them, but she forced them back. This faceless thing was not her husband, not the father of her children, certainly not the fine young man who had come courting on a fiery stallion plunging and curvetting beneath him. This man on whose head she sat was nothing, not a man, he was just a mass of rotting flesh that she was putting out of its misery.

Schalk had felt very little after the coloured servant found him. He had arrived at a point he had fixed in his mind. Not home, but to someone who would take him home. He heard Kleinbooï talking and preparing the stretcher. The vulture nightmare was over. Time had ceased to exist, even pain, because he had reached a point of feverish intensity where it was so great that it almost ceased. He was detached from his body, apart from it, watching as it were its adventures from afar. Soon he would be home. Soon he would see Jacoba. She will deal with this business. Do not worry, the apart Schalk said,

looking down at the Schalk that lay on the skins in the herder's hut. Do not worry, she will know what to do.

Then they picked him up. He felt the burn of the sun again, the glare of the out of doors.

Then he was there. Home. He saw Jacoba his wife. He wondered why she did not have them take him in. He heard Sybella scream and knew why. He knew he was a terrible sight. No sight for a young virgin girl. But why don't they take me in, he thought; into the coolness, the cleanliness of the big thatched house that was his home. In his mind he saw the bedroom, the big bed, the great dresser and brass-bound kist in which Jacoba kept their best clothes. The table by the window with a geranium in a pot. It was red. It had one flower out. Bright crimson, brighter than blood and a clustered unopened bloody bud. He felt the dogs come up to him and heard them chased away. My big dogs, he thought. If only I had taken some of them. He closed his eyes against the glare that beat down at him from a sky bright as polished steel. He saw his son's legs like great pillars clothed in moleskin. He saw Jacoba's black skirt and white apron, against the yellow wheels of the blue wagon that someone had painted only a few days ago. But why was he being put into the wagon? My wagon, he thought, that that boy—his name escaped him—had painted so prettily. How he had looked forward to driving it to nagmaal with his fine span of oxen, his whip clapping like gunshots above their sleek red backs. He saw their horns, white, black-tipped, sharp as spears. *Two riems*. What did Jacoba want riems for? *Tie him*, she said. His wife had said tie him. Tie me, he thought. He tried to say *Jacoba . . . Jacoba . . .* but the words were only said in his mind. His tongue did not utter them. Why did they not give him water and brandy? Surely that was what they would give a wounded man. That is what I would give him, he thought, if it was me. If it was Jacoba or Cert or Kaspar who was hurt. Surely that was the thing to do.

THE MASK

He felt them lifting him, pulling his arms out, spreadeagling him like our Lord on the Cross—crucified. What was she going to do, dress him? Did she think he lacked the courage? That he must be tied up like a Kaffir?

The great soft mass of the feather mattress was being pulled over him. To make me sweat, he thought. She means to sweat the fever out of me . . . to . . .

Then there was a jerk and it was over his face and Gert's *You'll smother him, Ma, you'll make him dead.* It came muffled by the softness of the goose feathers over him. Make him dead. The pain of it on his face. He gave a smothered scream as someone sat on him. The material was forced into his wounded face as the softness filled every gap. Pressing into his eyes, into the face wounds, into the hole where his nose had been. The weight of those people, of his wife, of his sons—bone of his bone, blood of his blood. His wife, Jacoba, was succouring him in her fashion into death. Jacoba—the viper he had nourished in his bosom. *Better this way. End him. Finish him. How can he live like that?* The mumbled words of her intention came to him in his agony. He saw pictures of his life with her, he saw pictures of her young pliant beauty so like that of Sybella to-day. He saw pictures of battles he had fought, hunts he had made, horses he had ridden, of Papegaai lying dead.

He dragged at the bonds that held him. His left had come loose. Gert had not made a good job of it. That was like Gert. He never made a good job of anything. Somehow he moved under them. They were going to kill him. *To make me dead,* he thought. He refused to die, but they must not know. He eased his face toward the side of the wagon. He found a place where he could breathe, then he lay still. They must not know. He could hear a little better now.

Jacob a said, "It is finished."

Gert said, "And now, Ma?"

She said, "Leave him. In the morning we will take off the

THE WAGON

mattress and bury him. No one will know that he did not die of his hurts. They will think he died as he lay here."

"The boys," Gert said.

"The boys know nothing and if they did they would not speak."

Now Schalk knew what they would do. Even the tying could be explained in order to dress him and stop him tearing at his face in the pain of the turpentine which they used to dress such wounds. Now he knew. Somehow his anger had overcome his pain. In the night he would escape. A new strange strength of anger flowed into him. Magtig, was he a bastard child to be smothered so easily? He was a man. A strong one at that. He felt the wagon creak as they got down and left him.

Dead, he thought, to them I am dead. It was strange to be alive when others thought him dead. Now I must plan, he thought, now. Of all the plans he had ever made in his life this must be the best.

At that moment he felt the mattress move. Had they come back to see if he was really dead? To finish him off if he was not? But if it had been that he would have heard them coming.

Then he felt a hand. A voice said, "*Baas, baas.*" It was Bosman. Bosman had come to save him. The bushman whose life he had saved so many years ago.

Ever since his master had left to hunt without him the old bushman had been uneasy. He had been left before when his master hunted alone and had never felt like this. Bosman did not think the way a white man thinks. He felt things. His instincts warned him of trouble, of danger, directed him to game and to water. He had a little hut some distance from the farmhouse where he lived alone, hunting jackals, rooikats and other vermin, killing an occasional buck to eat and waiting

THE MASK

till his master sent for him to go hunting or spoor lost cattle. Bosman was tame but he was not domesticated. He had adjusted himself to living under Schalk Fourie's protection. Schalk had come to be his God, his sun, his moon and stars. There was nothing else left to him in the world. In his uneasiness he had been prowling about when he saw the herdboys carrying his master in. He did not follow them because Tanta Jacoba hated him. She said he should have been killed. That all bushmen should be killed like the vermin that they were. So he hid and watched. Then he came closer, stalking the wagon as if it was a buck, from cover to cover. He was not afraid of the dogs. They knew him and would give no warning bark.

He was quite close, hidden behind a buttress of the barn, when they put his master in the wagon. He had seen what they were doing but had waited till dark to see if it was done.

His master was alive.

He crept on to the wagon bed, climbing up it like a dark shadow, slowly, moving only an inch at a time. He cased himself between the two mattresses till he lay beside his master and felt for his hands. He found the hand that was still tied and cut the riem. Then he began to drag his master out of the wagon. He was small but immensely powerful. Schalk was strong enough to ease himself along on his back. As they came to the edge of the wagon bed the bushman took his feet and guided them. Then, taking his waist he hoisted him over his shoulder and helped him on to the ground.

"Baas," he whispered, "baas . . ."

Schalk said, "Ja?"

Bosman said, "Baas, you must walk. I will help you but you must walk. Can you do it?"

"I can do it," Schalk said.

At that moment the dogs came up. All three of them enormous and rough-haired, like small lions in the half dark

THE WAGON

of the sickle moon. Their tails were wagging slowly from side to side. Their great jaws were open and the starlight shone on their sharp teeth.

Another shadow appeared, moving swiftly from the house. It was Sybella in her nightdress, with a man's coat, one of her brother's over it.

"We must get him away, Bosman," she said. "I'll help you."

The bushman took one arm and she the other. They put the old man's arms around their necks and moved off into the shadows of the outbuildings. Behind them the three dogs walked slowly, their heads down, their tongues lolling, their tails wagging slowly. A strange little procession in the starlit night of three people and three dogs moving away from the farmstead toward the koppies and bush of the distant pasture.

When her mother had told her to go Sybella had gone, but not to her room. The house could not have held her after what she had seen. Her father faceless, unrecognisable save for his eyes and clothes, and the fact that his dogs had known him. Worse than faceless, worse than dead it seemed to her, more terrible; for death was explicable—death could be understood.

So she ran into the house, and through it, out through the back door to the sheep kraals and the open smooth grass beyond them where a tame ostrich looked up at her, raising his head and swallowing a pebble that she watched, almost unseeing, go down the length of his throat. Then he walked on with long strides, seeking eyes and a lowered head. She saw everything suddenly with a terrible clarity—the cracks in the walls of the kraal, the lizards still sunning themselves before darkness fell. Seeing yet unseeing, astonished that things were still the same, that the ostrich still walked, that the lizards still ran or lay sunning themselves while her father, the twin centre of her universe, lay like that in agony. She was astonished

at her mother's lack of emotion, at her calmness, coldness. Astonished that she had been struck in the face instead of comforted. She ran on away from it, from life, from what she had seen, as if by running, by putting space between the event she had witnessed and herself she annihilated it, had put the clock back to before it had happened, because it seemed impossible that nothing except her father should have changed. Then she slowed up, her breasts were rising and falling as she panted. She stopped and turned. She must go back. She must see. There must be something she could do to help.

She returned slowly, skirting the wall of the kraal coming round the side of the house, and stood screened by a vine whose grape clusters hung from a crosspiece of an arbour that had fallen into disrepair. Here, hidden from her mother and brothers, she watched them commit murder, powerless to stop it and afraid. Now her world had collapsed. Utterly. The card house of her confidence was shattered. The great hunter and master of the farm was down, foundered, with his face torn off by wild beasts, and her mother, with whom she had thought herself more than close, a murderess.

She stood shivering and trembling as emotion swept over her in waves. Turning her head she vomited with horror, squatting on the ground unable to tear herself away.

I am watching them kill him, she thought. She heard her mother's words. She heard them in the wagon and waited till they got down again. Heard her mother say *In the morning . . .* and then stuck her fingers into her ears. The sun was almost down now. The world painted with the roseate blood of its setting. Now she could bear no more and found her way on tiptoe to her room. I'll go to bed, she thought. It's a dream, a nightmare. None of it is true. She would not eat with the others and she knew they did not want her, even think of her. She wondered how she would ever eat with them again. She lay crying on her bed and finally slept, the sleep of exhaustion,

THE WAGON

all energy, all feeling spent, so that she was as empty of life as a cup that has been drained.

When she woke the young moon was shining like a strip of orange peel in the sky. The frogs were croaking in the dam. A night bird called. Now she must see. Now I must go to him, she thought. Suddenly by this resolution she ceased to be a girl and became a woman. She crept out and going to the wagon found Bosman there with the dogs. There was no betrayal among animals or in this savage little hunter. None in her own heart, for she was still too young to understand betrayal, still ruled by her heart and senses.

Sybella was astonished at how well her father walked after what he had been through. She did not know that this was what accounted for his strength, the rage that had gone through him when he saw that his wife and children were ready to kill him. Had they nursed him he might have died—he knew that. He was tired. He had seen and done enough, and besides, with a face like this there was no point in living. So he might have let himself die. But now he would not die. Before God, nothing could kill him now. He was immortal—like those pagan gods of the Greeks that he had heard about who lived on Olympus kop in the land of the Greeks. The only Greeks he had ever seen were traders and shopkeepers and ungodlike in appearance, but no doubt they kept their best in the homeland. Delight flooded his heart that Sybella should have dared her mother's wrath to come to him. And Bosman, his little bushman, and his great hunting-dogs all loved him. It was only in adversity a man recognised his friends, but how odd that his wife, to whom he had given everything, and his sons whom he had set up with land and stock and implements, should be so ready to destroy him. Perhaps that was why. To some extent he was still their master, their benefactor.

They had to pretend respect for him, to simulate obedience

to his wishes, but they all had wished him gone. Only this little yellow man whose life he had saved bore him no malice for it, and his daughter, to whom he had given nothing but a smile and pat on the head occasionally as if she were a filly or a tame heifer, only these two and the dogs. . . . Only these, only these, the words became a kind of refrain to the movement of his feet. He could not fall, they were holding him, and his feet went on moving. Left, right, left, right, left, right. It is my land, he thought, my farm, *ons plek, ons land*, the heart of our people is in this soil to which we all belong.

Bosman now changed direction a little.

Sybella was surprised that he was not going directly to his hut. She said, "Isn't the hut that way?"

"Ja," he said, "but we are going somewhere else. Somewhere where they will not find the master."

They went over rougher ground where there was no track—not even a cattle track—to a small limestone kop. Here Bosman led them through a tiny passage between a many-branched mimosa growing against the stone outcrop of the hill itself. In the passage he turned quickly and Sybella found that they were in a small cave. Bosman struck a flint against his steel and kindled a small fire. Her father was resting his back against the wall, sitting up, his eyes blazing in the raw rottenness of his face. Sybella forced herself to look at him. I must not blench or vomit. She had nearly vomited again on the way from the smell of his face so near her own as she had helped him.

The cave was filled with paintings of wild animals. Bosman had found one of his own people's ancient homes. At the back of the cave there was a small spring that dripped water into a half ostrich-shell held upright by three small moss-covered stones. As the fire burned up the painted animals became more grotesque and seemed to dance in the light of the flames. She watched the bushman dig with his hands in a corner and

THE WAGON

come up with a bottle that she recognised as brandy. So he had been stealing brandy, she thought. Her mother was right about that. But what did it matter? She watched Bosman giving drink to his master, almost forcing it on him, till after having taken half the bottle he was lying in a drunken stupor.

Bosman touched the wounded face with his finger. Schalk never moved. He was dead drunk. Drunk with exhaustion, tiredness, relief, fear, starvation and brandy.

"Now the dogs," Bosman said. He called them in and drew the girl back away from her father. "Give them room," he said.

He knew what they would do. Suster the wheaten-coloured bitch was the first. She was the oldest and cleverest. Then one of her sons. Then the other. Bosman had known this. Bosman had known because he lived near the animals, both wild and tame. Sybella had known it once she realised what the bushman was doing. Like Lazarus, she thought. It was Lazarus whose sores the dogs had licked, but Bosman knew nothing of the Bible. He only knew animals, and men, and love. No other way could have cleaned her father better. The swift tongues of dogs pressed on the soft pussy flesh and they licked on till they came to clean meat and white bone. Then, as if they knew they had done enough, they stopped and lay beside him. The bitch stopped first, as she had begun first. And all the time her father had not moved. He had felt nothing. He had only snored and groaned in his drunkenness.

The water in the iron pot on the fire was boiling now and Sybella saw Bosman drop bits of broken water tortoise-shell into it.

He smiled at her.

"It will melt," he said, "and become thick. When it is cold I will make him drunk again and smear it over his face with an ostrich feather. Ja," he said, "it will be like a skin over him and no fly can lay an egg upon it. Underneath," he said,

"new flesh and skin will grow and then it will come off like the skin of a snake when it changes."

Bosman said this was one of the remedies of his people. How wise they were in such strange ways and the white people thought of them as vermin and shot them down.

"You must go now, missus," Bosman said. "Take the dogs and do not come back."

"What about food?" she asked. "Shall I not bring food?"

"No," he said. "I will hunt for him. I will feed my master."

She knew he would, and wondered what strange foods would be put before her father. Ants' eggs, snakes, mice, a mongoose perhaps, as well as pieces of buck. Yet there might be virtue in these things that the white man did not know. In lizards, and fresh caterpillars straight off the trees, and snakes and tortoise eggs.

She went out into the paling night. Alone she could go fast. The cave was only two miles from the house. She began to run.

5. To the North

BREAKFAST ON the farm next day was a silent meal. Gert and his wife and fat baby had left at dawn. The three brothers said nothing. Sybella hardly raised her eyes from her plate and ate standing near the door that led into the kitchen.

Their mother's face was very white, her enormous dark eyes purple ringed, her lips indrawn, tight, and almost colourless.

When they had done eating they knelt down to pray and the maidservants came in from the kitchen and knelt, and Jacoba prayed and read from the Bible in a hard dry voice.

Sybella thought, how strange that this woman should be my mother and a murderess and that she should read from the Word of God with such authority. Soon, she thought, she must talk to Jan, with whom because he was so young she had much in common. Her other two brothers she did not care for. They were young, brutal and woman-struck. You could see it in their faces, in their searching eyes and sniffing open nostrils. Till she had met Simon, Sybella had had no knowledge of how those feelings applied to human beings. She knew them in cattle, horses, dog, and wild animals that she watched courting and mating. She had classed her brothers with the beasts—the neighing stallion, the bellowing bull that pawed the ground and stood with neck outstretched and bared teeth behind the bulling cow. But now she recognised these feelings in herself, she recognised her own desire, and it made her laugh to think of herself as a heifer or a filly, but it brought her no nearer to her

brothers. Big, uncouth brutes, brainless, who had not dared to stop their mother in her crime. Cowards. Ja, they were brave enough as hunters or with savage animals and in battles with men, but they had no real courage, nothing of that vital fury that would have enabled them to stand up to the woman who had dominated them so long when she forced them into such a crime. She wondered what they were all thinking now that they had found the body gone. She wondered if Gert knew? Perhaps he had been the first to find out and had told his mother.

After breakfast Sybella went about her various duties, seeing to the poultry, to the buttermaking in the dairy, the bleaching of the sheets on the short grass near the laundry, and only much later did she get her young brother alone.

She found him platting a stock whip out of four strands of blesbok skin. He started when she came near him, as if afraid.

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Jan," she said, "when the time comes and we can get away will you come with me?" "Ja, Sybella," he said, "This place has become terrible to me. We must escape."

She patted his head. "That's settled then," she said. "I will think of something. I'll make a plan." She wanted to tell him that their father was still alive. She was convinced that Bosman would save him, but felt it better to say nothing.

Jacob² was worried about her husband's disappearance. It was Gert who, before daylight, had told her he had gone. "One riem is undone," he said, "and the other cut. He cannot be dead. Someone helped him."

That was the trouble of it in her mind. Not dead. Had her plan worked everything would have been so simple, but now . . .

Nevertheless she fixed her mind on him being dead. Perhaps he was dying somewhere on the veld and that might take some

explaining when eventually someone heard of it. What a shame it was. The other would have been so easy. She would have said, "Yes, we tied him to operate on him and he died." Everyone would have understood and sympathised with their great loss.

But there were compensations. Dead or not dead he was away and she had the farm, and those of her sons and sons-in-law, in her powerful grip. Now she would weld them into a single unit, a great area of land with immense resources and great riches in cattle, sheep, horses, goats and ostriches. She could see how to do it. Everything must be pooled. The cattle moved from farm to farm as the weather and grazing conditions changed. It must all be one, almost a small country with the Ouplek, her home, its centre, and herself the axle on which the wheel revolved.

Once Sybella was married to Botha the block would be complete, solid, almost square. A small republic of which she was the president. If only Schalk had been able to see things her way, see them big instead of being so contented with his own farm and stock, his home, wife and children. That was the way it had always been. Looking back she remembered it so well. Then slowly, as her dream had grown, his interest had faded. She no longer listened to his stories, his hopes, to the things he had seen or accomplished. They were too small for her. Then he had been disappointed in the children. They had been hers from the start. Not only had she carried them in her belly, she had created their minds and hearts, moulding them like tools to fit her hand. And Schalk had drifted away into a world of his own, hunting and stock breeding and such idiocies as having a picture painted of his blue wagon and span of red working oxen.

So the days passed into weeks. Nothing was said. There was no discussion and little talk. The blue wagon with its yellow wheels and painted posies still stood in the yard. Life

continued in a regular but muted routine. The old man who had been the heart of the place, who had loved it, was no longer here. The woman who directed affairs now was a brain without a body. Things were done which never had been done before. Old working animals that had been pensioned off were slaughtered. An old bay hunting-pony on which some of the children had learned to ride was shot. Some servants were even turned off the place as useless though they and their fathers before them had been born here. There was no word for efficiency then, but Mevrouw Jacoba Fourie was efficient. Anything, anyone, that it did not pay to keep must be got rid of—and they were. Her sons and sons-in-law, independent farmers, now found themselves little more than foremen on their own properties. But things went so well for them that they had no complaints. Jacoba relieved them from the necessity of thought or decision. In many ways it was a great relief just to do what they were told, to become as it were children once again. But children with the strength and lusts and greed of men.

Six months passed—two nagmaals. No visitors came to the Ouplek, or if they did they were told that the master was away, which was indeed true—and these were not neighbours but passersby, travellers seeking shelter on the way to the east and north. Hospitality was the tradition of the land and no traveller was refused who came mounted, and with servants, proving himself a man of substance and no renegade, criminal or gun runner.

In this time the farms prospered under Tanta Jacoba's hand. The stock increased and was fat. The veld was better owing to the rotational grazing she practised. A little world was forming like dough under the pressure of her able hands. One day she would bake the loaf of her desire.

Sybella saw her father half a dozen times, meeting him

TO THE NORTH

secretly by night. Jan saw him once. She had broken the news to him, swearing him to secrecy. He kept the secret well enough but the change in his appearance, his new-found happiness, might easily have given him away had his mother been less interested in the affairs of the farm and spent more time with her youngest son.

Schalk was strong again, amazingly strong, fitter perhaps than he had been for many years—on the diet of fresh half-cooked meat, insects and wild herbs which Bosman fed him. Without bread or potatoes or coffee or sugar he had no fat on him—he was all muscle. Bosman took him out for long walks at night and they set traps and snares together for game. Bosman had gone to the place where he had been attacked and found his gun. It was badly rusted but they had cleaned it. Sybella had brought him powder and ball. Bosman had made himself a new stock of arrows and had filled a blesbok horn with poison.

Schalk did not think they would try to murder him again but intended to take no chances. Later, when the time came, he was going back, but he was going mounted and armed. Sybella would bring two horses saddled and bridled. But he must be well, strong—stronger than ever—for he had great plans in his mind. A new life. Now he knew what he could face, what he could do. He knew he could live like a bushman without any of the things that even the hardiest white men craved. All he needed was powder and ball. The adventure which had been in his heart for so much of his life was now possible. He would go north and hunt elephant.

There was no doubt in Sybella's mind that many of the servants on the farm knew of her father's whereabouts and even something of the story of the attempted murder, but white men's affairs had nothing to do with them and they watched what to them was a drama as an audience on the outside of it all. Only

some of those who had been thrown off the place but still skulked in the seldom visited parts of the farm and were supported by their relatives who still worked, were eager to see some action.

"When he gets well," they said, "we will go to him. He will take care of us. We are his people."

At last Schalk felt that the day had come. He told Bosman to call Sybella.

When she came to him the following day by a group of big thorn trees that was their meeting place, he said, "My plans are made. To-morrow we come back to the house."

She said, "What are you going to do, Pa?"

He said, "I'm taking my wagon and oxen, some horses and dogs, some of my people and five hundred pounds in gold, and I am going north—to the frontier where there will be room for such as I. Outcasts and bold men who fear nothing because we have lost all. Besides," he said, "it is what I always wanted to do. Sometimes I prayed to God that He would so arrange things that I could leave here where I lived and fattened like a stalled ox and go hunting and adventuring in the north."

"Like young Simon," Sybella said.

"Ja, my child, like him. It all came back when I heard him talk." He paused and then said, "The Lord has answered my prayers. It has been a lesson to me, and let it be a lesson to you. Do not ask the Lord's help in frivolous things because you may get them, not quite in the form you wished but with strange accessories and subtle decorations. Ja, I prayed to go north, but as a man, not as a disfigured creature—already old—from whom all men will turn away in disgust and fear. But even for that I have a plan as you will see. So to-morrow bring me the horses. Bring General, my black stallion, and the blue roan for Bosman. Bring them saddled and bridled

with head collars on and riems as if for war. Ja," he said, "for it is war. This is a commando in which I ride with one old bushman against those who should have been my best beloved."

"Pa," Sybella said, "we are coming with you."

"We?" he asked.

"Ja, Jan and I. We have decided."

"She will try to stop you."

"We are your children," Sybella said, "and how could she hold us when we can threaten her and you are there to prevent force?"

So next day in the first morning light Sybella slipped out of the house and had the horses saddled—the big black stallion, the little blue roan stallion, her own iron-grey mare, and a bay three-year-old that her brother had broken to the saddle. They led one horse each, Sybella being the stronger taking the reins of the black. As if he understood, he came quietly but with flashing eyes, wide nostrils and flicking tail. In a few minutes they reached the trees. There their father and his servant were waiting but they looked different.

Her father seemed bigger than Sybella had ever seen him, more erect, looking very strong in the clean clothes she had brought him, one at a time stealing them from his closet when occasion offered. He had on his wide felt hat and wore an ostrich plume on it at an angle. But the most strange thing was the leather mask that covered his face. It reached from forehead to below his chin. His grey and white beard hung out below it. It was pierced with large circles, holes for his eyes which shone like blue steel in the dark cavern of the shadowed mask. In his hand he carried his gun.

Bosman had discarded his clothes—the old rags he usually wore—and was naked but for a small rawhide loin cloth. Over his shoulder he wore a quiver of arrows. From his waist hung

a net with an ostrich egg container for water, and some horns filled with medicines of various kinds. He carried a digging stick and a buckskin kaross in which to wrap himself against the cold. In his hand he held a bushman bow.

Sybella and her brother handed over the horses and without a word they mounted. Then Schalk on his black horse, his gun butt on knee, led the way, sitting proudly in the saddle. On his left the bushman rode, a little behind him. Behind them came Sybella and her brother.

Jacoba had been looking for her daughter and youngest son. Where had they got to? They had not come in for breakfast. They had not been there to kneel at the prayers that had followed it. She was angry. For months now, since that day, the children had not been the same. They had been sullen, silent, scarcely answering when she spoke, doing as little as they could about the farm and keeping out of the way almost as if they were hiding. Young fools—as if she had not known best. Well, whatever had happened to him he must be dead by now. She still did not know how he had escaped, or who had cut the riem that held him. Who had betrayed her and undone her plan? What fool? What traitor?

It was then she heard a shot and going to the stoep in front of the house saw a group of horsemen galloping toward the house. She recognised Schalk's black horse. She recognised the others. The bushman and the two missing children, Sybella leaning over her grey pony's neck, her hair a black flag behind her. But the leader, the man on her husband's horse? She knew very well who it was, no one else could ride that horse, no one else rode as he did, as wildly sitting as if he were part horse, had been foaled with his mount, seated upon its back.

But with a part of her mind she refused to believe it. Schalk

was dead and this man looked stronger, slimmer, sat more erect than Schalk had done for many years. No, Schalk was dead. This was a masquerade, a madness, none of it was true. It was her age. Women became queer and saw things at her age. She had been touched by the sun, when she was out yesterday in the vineyard. But she knew that it was Schalk. As he approached she saw his bright blue eyes burning through the holes in that terrible mask that covered his disfigurement.

She covered her eyes with her hands for a moment as if she would blot out the scene in front of her. She hid it for an instant, but the sound of the galloping hoofs would not be stilled. Suddenly she changed—What had she to fear?—and drawing herself up, waited for what was to come.

Her husband almost rode her down, pulling his stallion up in a rear so that his forehoofs only seemed a few inches from her face. She saw his great belly, mouse-coloured, hairless, his genitals and sweating thighs, she smelled the horse sweat and man sweat, felt the hot breath of the horse on her as flecks of white foam fell on her bosom and on the horse's chest. The great hoofs pawed the air in front of her, fanning her with the wind of their blows in the nothingness. In her mind she noticed these things, noticed that the girth on the saddle was new, that the horse's hoofs had been recently trimmed, that he wore his head collar and riem under his bridle as if for a journey. Noticed her husband's feet so firmly in the stirrups, his unmoving legs as he clamped the horse in a grip of iron. This was no dying man. Some terrible miracle had taken place. This faceless thing, on a black war-horse prancing and pawing in front of her, was not the man she had managed and led for so long. Not the man who had sired the children she had taken away from him.

A strange silence now fell on everything, everyone. Not

merely the group around the front of the house—the mounted people and the woman—but among the servants, the workers about the yard and kraals. All became still—even the animals that were loose about the place, a pair of oxen that pulled the scotch cart, the tame ostrich, a red mare and her foal, all seemed stilled, frozen in a silence that had fallen like an invisible blanket over everything. The horses stood still now, only their barrels heaving after the gallop. But they neither moved their feet nor switched their tails. The dogs that had run up sat still in the dust gazing up at their master with golden eyes.

Then the silence was broken, shattered like a cup dropped upon a stone-flagged floor.

Schalk said, "I have returned from the dead. Succoured by my servant whom you would have seen dead even as you tried to kill me, your husband, the father of your children, the man who has lain at your side for more than thirty years, who has fed and clothed you, protected you, has prayed with you daily, has suffered with you over the deaths of the children we have lost. Who has watched the sun go down at your side and seen it rise again. Surely," he said, raising the hand that held his gun to the sky, "surely before God a whore is better than a murderess. Better that a woman, tempted by her lusts, should take a stranger to her bed than place it upon the man she has married and attempt to suffocate him like a bastard born to some Kaffir maid."

He did not speak loudly but his voice was clear—each word thought out, placed like a barb. For months this speech had been forming in his heart, been tested in his mind, been turned over, matured, ripened, till it spat out of him like the venom of a cobra.

Jacoba recoiled before him.

"I did it for the best," she said. "I thought the pain would send you mad, that you would not survive."

"You thought that you could get command of the farm,

that my death could be explained, that your children feared you too much to protect me, but it did not turn out like that. Your youngest children are mine. They are coming with me."

"Going with you?" Jacoba said. "That they are not. And where are you going?"

"To the North, where men, even faceless men, are welcome," her husband said.

Sybella said, "Mevrou Fourie," for now that she was free she would not call this woman mother, "we go with Pa to the North."

"You follow that idiot boy with his box of paints. A shameless hussy that follows a man like a bitch in heat." Jacoba saw her neat plan of the property rounded off by Botha's place fading, slipping out of her reach. "You will stay," she said. "The North is no place for a young girl."

"And is the Ouplek a good place," her husband asked, "with its memories? And is it good to mate a young girl with an old bull like Botha, who could be her father, just because you hanker after his land? Before God, would you trade your virgin daughter for six thousand morgen of winter grazing?"

He dismounted, throwing his leg over the black horse's neck and sliding down like a boy. He went toward Jacoba.

"You will prepare everything I need," he said. "Food, clothing. In two days we shall leave with my wagon for the North. And there is nothing you can do. Too many people know of what happened and my intention. Ja," he said, "you can run the place till I return. If I return. So you will be caught on the cleft stick of your own avarice and hatred. What you make may be for me. At any time I may come back, but you will not be able to sit still. That terrible nature of yours will drive you on. Ja, Jacoba," he said, "woman who was once my life, my heart, the very centre of my being,

THE MASK

I am sorry for you. For truly the devil has taken possession of your soul."

Two days later the wagon was loaded, the oxen inspanned. The long giraffe-hide whip clapped like rifle shots over the sleek red skins of the oxen. The great yellow wheels began to roll and Schalk Fourie's trek with his two children, his bushman and other servants, his riding and spare horses, spare oxen and dogs, was off for the North. For the frontier of Africa.

6. The Flood

SIMON VAN DER BERG looked at a number of wagons before he bought one, though King Williamstown was the heart of the wagon-making industry and said to be incapable of turning out a bad one. Simon was not afraid of getting a bad wagon. He knew too much to be caught that way. But what he wanted was the best. A wagon was for life, for more than your life. You passed it on to your sons, for in these great hand-built homes on wheels a man could live his whole life, moving it as he willed, hunting game and grazing his beasts in the circle of which it was the centre. Before God, many spent their lives like this, hunters, trek Boers to whom after a while even the most beautiful place became repugnant through familiarity. Their love was for the whole land, its entirety, not little dabs and spots of comfortable prettiness. To live they had to explore, to overcome difficulties, to resist. They were undomestic men whose love for Africa was generic and not specific, like those men who love and take all women rather than courting just one and bedding her to wife. It was on such wheels that the Great Trek had moved a thousand miles over the hostile veld in search of freedom and to escape the English and their tax collectors. These wagons were the ships that sailed the vast interior.

Not that Simon thought quite like this. But he knew that one day he would settle down, one day he would return to the

THE MASK

sweet valley of Constantia, to the Cape, to the dark soil leached from the hills, enriched by the forests that had once grown in the bottom lands that were now fields and vineyards, framed by the sharp, stark blue teeth of the mountains that protected them, showing their fangs to the summer sky. Ja, he would be back, but in the meantime he was still on his way out, and for such stormy seas he intended to cross no ship could be too strong. For it was possible to think of Africa as a sea, a frozen sea of great waves that had become mountains, and great, calm troughs between them that were the plains. So it was worth waiting—and at last he heard of a wagon builder who had built a wagon that all men spoke of with some wonder. He had built it for his son to go trading in the north and now the son was dead. Suddenly death had taken him in his bed, a thing so rare for a man of his age that some suspected poison or witchcraft.

And it was this wagon that Simon bought. It was big, eighteen foot long and five-foot wide. It was heavy and immensely strong, being built of selected and seasoned assegai wood, wild pear, blackwood, stink- and iron-wood, with a bed of yellow wood planks. All these woods except for the bed were iron hard. Neither the heat of the sun, nor frost, nor water affected them. They were the working parts of the wagon—the wheels, the schamel and tongue or forecarriage as it were, which enabled a wagon to turn sharply, the front wheels being much lower than the back passing under its body. It had extra wide iron tyres. They were seven inches across, which would make the going much easier in sand or mud. The frame for the canvas tent was beautifully made and there were wagon boxes and compartments for storage fitted into the sides.

The wagon was painted bright red with dark blue designs of interlacing daisies. Simon had done what his father had always told him to do. Make sure of what you need, make sure that

THE FLOOD

you will need it all your life, and then buy the best. This applied equally to wagons, guns, dogs, horses, cattle, saddlery, to everything upon which, if trouble came, your very life might depend. And of these things, his pa had said, the most important is a wife, for it is she indeed who makes a man's life, raising him up or casting him down. He thought of the farm he had just left, of Jacoba, a hard woman who had once been beautiful. He thought of Sybella, a young soft girl who was beautiful and whose nakedness had brought his heart leaping into his mouth, had made his hand tremble so that he could hardly hold his pencil, and then somehow had taken charge of it, guided it, so that never in his life had he drawn so well before.

He had become attached to the Oubaas, the old master, old Schalk. He seemed to be a lonely and disappointed man, for though he owned so much he enjoyed so little. He had even seemed to envy his trekking north to look at the great world and its wonders. "Ah," he had said, "if I was younger and could have my life over again I would not sit in one place like a hen brooding her eggs. But I was born near by, and Jacoba was born on the farm. She could never bear to leave. No," he said, "even to go three hundred miles to Cape Town was too much. This was her world and it has become mine, but I get books. I read about the world, about the deserts and mountains, the discoveries that have been made. It is fortunate that I read English for it is they who write the books. Officers from India who come hunting, and missionaries bringing the word of God to the Kaffirs."

It was strange to think of the old man with his dreams, with his pretty daughter who had been so infected by them that she wanted to go north with him. What wonderful company she would have been, how he had fought the temptation to take her when by stretching out a hand, by raising a finger she would have been in his arms and bed.

Having got his wagon he now began to look for oxen and finally bought a matched span of sixteen black oxen. They were in their prime, all rising six years old and still had their full strength and weight to come. Moreover they had not been ill used and were very tame. He bought mealies for them and fed them himself on the outspan, calling them by name as he fed them, so that before long they came like dogs to his call.

He left the inn and slept in the clean comfort of his wagon. He hired two more Cape boys—a driver named Philip and a boy, Hendrik, to act as voorlooper—to lead the oxen, and then began to inquire about which were the best trade goods to buy. The answer was guns and ammunition—powder, lead—some medical supplies such as turpentine and epsom salts. Condiments—pepper, curry powder and the like, and Kaffir truck—axe heads, knives, blankets, beads, black three-legged iron cook-pots and small mirrors.

In all it took two months to complete his affairs, load up his goods and get started. Turning away from the coastal belt toward the north-west, heading his lead oxen into what was then the dark interior eight hundred miles away.

At home in Constantia his father was riding in the wine harvest—load upon load of dripping purple grape bunches to the press in the great wine cellar—and wondering about his adventurous son.

At the Ouplek, Schalk Fourie was being nursed in a cave by his bushman servant.

In the north, in the Zoutpansberg, in the village of Schoemansdal the people were uneasy for there was talk of Kaffir trouble and they were the last outpost of the white man. The point that had been driven like a spear into the black belly of the North by the white men, and they were resented.

THE FLOOD

The great chiefs Makapan and Mapela were tired of it. Their young men cried for war, their spears were thirsty and needed to be washed in blood.

The witch doctors were busy with auguries and prophecy.

But in the kraals the black children still played with mealie cobs and clay oxen with mimosa thorns for horns and in the village the white children still ran and shouted and collected honey from the hidden combs of the wild bees in the forest.

And the Nyl flowed softly over the drift on the North Road and the pace of the ox was fifteen miles a day when the going was good.

Simon travelled by easy stages through Somerset East and Colesberg to Potchefstroom without adventures. He slept on the road or at farms. He painted pictures here and there while he rested his oxen. There was no sense of urgency in him. The wheels of his new wagon rolled fast enough. A day was a day, and no days would be gained, no life prolonged, by greater speed. He shot a buck now and then for meat, and birds—francolin, partridge, khoran, guinea fowl, and ducks and geese—when he was near water. But this was all tame country now. There was little big game left, no elephants and few lions. There were leopards, or tigers as he called them, in the hills but they never bothered him.

He moved and lived in a kind of dream, thinking of the future, of the to-morrow when the great mysteries of life would be open to him as he reached country that had not been lived in by white men before, which was as God and the Kaffirs had made it. He thought of women, of the day when he would know them, for he was not like some others and had never laid a hand on a coloured maid though many would have been pleased enough to let him. The picture of Sybella was continually with him. Not only the shameful drawings of her naked by the river, but in his mind, delineated there even more

THE MASK

clearly than in his sketchbook. He wondered why he had repulsed her. He decided he had been afraid, that he was not ready to give what she wanted. He was a moth to her flame and she, he well knew in his heart, was set on fire by his presence, so surely coming together they would have consumed each other. Yet he felt that though each mile took him farther from her they were not really parted, that the string of their lives would somehow in the future be twisted together once again by the strange and perverse hand of fate.

He was in this mood when Andries told him that there was a witch doctor at their fire who would throw the bones for the baas in exchange for some sugar, coffee and meat.

The Nyanga was an old withered man, dressed in an ancient pair of trousers that had once been black. Round his neck he wore a necklace of tiny tortoise shells threaded like beads. In his hand he carried a tall thin stick of red ivory wood. He had with him a boy, naked but for a loin cloth, who carried a basket.

Simon knew that this old man desired to call little attention to himself or his journey and that his regalia was without doubt being carried in the basket by his attendant with the blanket and kaross he had on his head. Coming from the Cape, Simon had no experience of witch doctors but he had heard stories of them. Later, in his travels he had heard more, and now was his chance to see something of their ways for himself.

The old man could speak Dutch. He said, "Baas, for some food I will tell you the future. For food and a little silver I will go into it more deeply."

Simon said, "You shall have silver. And what is your name?"

"I am called Mookulu," the Nyanga said, "Mookulu the wise, and I come from the north. From the salt mountains."

"That is where I am going," Simon said.

"Then, oh my master, it is good that you met me for you will

THE FLOOD

need my help. For the wind of trouble ruffles the smooth lake of peace as the white snake stirs."

He squatted down and held out his hand for the small raw-hide bag his assistant had ready for him. Putting it between his legs he cleared a space in front of him, wiping away the dust and smoothing the hard red ground. He turned out his bones, his *dolos* as they are called, which means unusual bones. Most of them were the *astragalis* or the knuckle-bones of various animals—lion, hyena and aardvark, sheep, goats, monkeys and baboons. But there were also cowrie shells, two ancient ceramic beads, an oblong of ivory, a double marula pip, the pyramid points of ox hoofs, stones from the stomach of the crocodile, hair balls from calves and the beak of a vulture.

The Nyanga now put a root into his mouth and chewed it. Then, picking up the bones in both hands, he spat the mixture of saliva and root fragments on them and threw them forward on to the cleared ground between his legs.

The future is foretold by the manner in which the bones fall, in their relation to each other, for each has a meaning. The bone which represents the doctor himself, the thrower, is the knuckle joint of the aardvark or antbear because the doctor is in the habit of digging in the ground for medicinal roots and herbs. The knuckle bone of a hyena represents the forefathers, since hyenas consume the bodies of men. The beak of a vulture or eagle gives direction; the bones of a rietbok which lives in swamps denotes water; the carapace of a small tortoise proclaims its opposite—the desert—for it walks where everything else is dead. Each bone has four positions. Upright means walking, upside down means sick or dead, falling on the left side means resting but watchful. On the right, since this is the assegai or striking arm, means that the person whose fortune is being told is helpless and in danger.

Four times the old man threw the bones, spitting out a mix-

ture of roots and sputum on them each time. And all the time he chanted. His eyes were veiled, opaque as if smeared with grease, in the wrinkles of his withered face.

At last he looked up, his eyes bright and alert. "Ja, baas," he said, "it is there, all of it. The days that are to come are unrolled like a mat."

"Well," Simon said, "what is it? Is it good or bad?"

"Young man, what life is all good or bad? Each is a mixture, as if beer was mixed with water. For some, the lucky ones, there is more beer. With others, the unlucky, there is more water."

"And what's in mine?" Simon asked.

"In yours, young sir, there is more beer than water, and the beer is strong. You go to the north. But you told me that. There you will be in danger but will not die though you will see much death. You will kill. Your beloved will die in your arms. I see a snake. I see a mask. At one time you will be overwhelmed by a flood which is not water. This I do not understand but it is so. You will meet great men—warriors—both black and white. You will win rewards and honour but you will suffer much. Somewhere," he looked around him, "there is a woman who tracks you as a tiger tracks a lost lamb. If she is not your heart's desire you had best flee fast and far. If she is your love, fear not for good will come of it and joy. Look." He pointed to the double marula pip where it lay on the red soil. "There she lies. There lies love and woman. There too lies lust. The good or the bad that only you can understand, for the difference lies in your heart—which I cannot read."

Simon gave him some silver, food for his journey, and told him he could rest for the night with his boys by their fire.

"I praise your munificence," the old man said. "I thank you for your hospitality and tell you again that no matter what comes to pass you have no cause for fear. Death will not come

THE FLOOD

to you in battle nor from wild beasts. Only time will kill you, as it kills all living things." He pointed to a big thorn tree near which the wagon lay. "That tree is old, older than a hundred men, but it will die the death of a tree. It will not be struck down by lightning or fire. You, young baasic, are like the tree. So will you live, with many resting under the shadows of your branches in old age. So will you die, peacefully rooted in the soil of your kraal."

Next morning the old man and his servant were gone, and so too was much of what he had said from Simon's mind. But he had noted it in his journal, for to have your fortune told by a witch doctor was something to remember even if what he actually said was soon forgotten. Still he was comforted in some way. He need fear nothing. A woman—he knew her to be Sybella—was thinking of him. One day he would go back to her when he was older and had seen more, when the tree to which the Nyanga had compared him was ready to take root. She was so young that he was not afraid of her not waiting. This too gave him comfort and a feeling of pride, but by the time the oxen were inspanned the doctor and his words were left behind, lost in the trail of dust raised by the wagon as it rolled along the road. Simon's eyes were on the future, on the fate that lay balanced between the lead oxen's upcurving horns.

He was in the high veld now and it was winter, swept by icy winds when they blew from the south. The water pans were frozen with thin ice and the dawns silver with hoar frost. Every leaf on every tree, every blade of grass, dipped in individual silver, glistened like glass. The spiderwebs between the trees and the tall grass clumps hung like structures of webbed steel, thick as whiplashes with the frost that covered them. When the sun rose it was fairyland indeed—a white world decorated with the prisms of the melting ice that diamonded them. As the sun climbed into the sky the days grew warm if windless,

and the great world of softly rolling plains, a universe that was like a sea whose silence was broken only by the sounds the wagon made as it creaked like a ship riding over the inequalities of the ground, or crashed over rocks and anthills. And where the track led upward the driver's shouts to the oxen, "Bosman . . ." "Witpens . . ." "Geelbek . . ." and the claps of his whip, like shots in the crystal clearness of the air smashed the silence, shattering it with their sudden violence.

Day followed day as dream follows dream, and because each was the same they merged into each other, eventless but busy, until at last they began to drop from the high country into the middle veld as the Boers called it, the land intermediate between the bitter highlands and the pestilential bush of the low country.

Here the soil was no longer grey but red, chocolate coloured or black. There were great trees, more bush—in places so thick as to be impenetrable—and in the far distance new mountains were flung against the horizons of the north. This was the Waterberg that he must cross. His road led still farther, to the next range that lay hidden beyond them—the Zoutpansberg or saltpan mountains that were his goal. Simon was beginning to understand Africa now. Its immensity. Its silence. The ranges of mountains that lay across its plains, each an invitation, a seduction to adventure, each demanding that its mystery be penetrated so that farther, deeper, more secret mysteries should become apparent. It was much warmer here. Spring was coming and these plains were much lower than the high veld that he had left behind him. The grass was good. Soft sweet veld, with plenty of buffalo grass so that the oxen bloomed again, lost their heavy coats and became sleek as black grapes lashed to the stem of the trek gear. There was more game here too—kudu, hartebeest and springbok—so with plenty of meat to eat, his people were well content and their bellies full.

THE FLOOD

A springbok hung by its hocks head down, from the tent of the wagon. Its lyre horns swinging as the wagon rolled. When they stopped the dogs stood on their hind legs to lick the blood that had dripped on to the heavy floor-boards. Simon had shot it that morning and coming up to kill it with his knife had been amazed again at the sweet perfume that came from some gland in the back of these antelopes at the moment of death. These buck were a pleasure to watch as they ran and leaped. Pale brown, with a dark streak of chestnut on the flank, and a ruff of long hair down their backs which they raised at will. Sometimes they played, pronking as it was called, jumping into the air and landing on all four feet only to leap up again, bouncing like balls.

There were a lot of buck about, more it seemed to him this afternoon than in the morning. Then at dawn he was woken by his dogs attacking something and a sound like the sea breaking along a beach. The boys were shouting. He jumped up, gun in hand, to find himself surrounded by springbok. The noise he had heard was the sound of their passing round the wagon, almost touching it, as if it was a rock standing in the river of their progress. His boys were killing buck with their kerries and assegais, the dogs were worrying them, pulling them down till they stood exhausted with pink lolling tongues. And still they came, on out of the dawn, out of the east. A flood of life, pale brown and white, that covered the veld like a carpet. The buck moved slowly, at a walk, and already the ground was cut up by their myriad tiny hoofs as if it had been harrowed. There were big buck among them, kudu and hartebeest, that had been caught up in the moving stream and could not turn back. Simon thanked God that the horses and oxen were tied to the trek tou or they too would have gone. He saw two zebras, a mare and foal, caught like black and white painted toys in the yellow flood.

He knew what he was seeing. He had heard about it but had

scarcely believed what he had been told. This was a springbok trek. The houbok, the residents as it were of the district, had been augmented by the trekbok. No one knew whence they came, or why, or where they went. It was said that they went as far as the sea in the west and died there from drinking the salt water, piling up in great banks along the golden strand, and rotting smelled so strong that the people in those parts were driven from their homes and the Kaffirs from their kraals.

There were thousands of them, hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions. As far as the distant hills the veld was blanketed with them. Some were so near that he could touch them. And still they came—slowly, strongly, irrepressibly weighted by their thousands. Simon stood by the wagon with his boys, watching, awed by the magnitude of this spectacle. It was biblical, immense, like one of the plagues sent by God upon the Egyptians. The whole world was yellowish white with moving bodies, the horizon obscured by the dust that rose in clouds and hung like a red mist above them. The buck swept up to the wagon, parted round it and closed again. They flowed round it as a flood flows round a rock, swirling and eddying. There were whirlpools of buck, waves of buck that carried the flotsam of still more and bigger beasts, more kudu, more zebras, some wildebeest which unable to breast the stream or cross it flowed with it westward.

All that day the buck trekked and half the next. The night was filled with the muffled thunder of their tiny hoofs. The clouds of dust, colourless in the moonlight, hung suspended like a mist above the black points of their twisted horns. As they moved some gave a call that was half whistle and half snort, like the sneeze of a horse. The dogs, utterly cowed now, crouched beneath the wagon bed, staring out with golden frightened eyes, unable to understand that the buck they usually pulled down so easily should play this trick upon them.

THE FLOOD

The buck streamed on through the night, through the dawn, through the day. Big and little ones, rams and ewes, old ones and young ones, all different yet all the same. Everything was coated with red dust. Simon and the Kaffirs were red men, the dogs red dogs, the wagon red, the black oxen red but streaked with black where they had rubbed themselves. The eyes of both men and beasts were sore, dust filled and bloodshot. The oxen bellowed with thirst. Then the buck thinned down. Now came the laggards, the weak and sickly. Some were hurt and ran on three legs. Behind them, harrying them, came the predators. Simon saw a lioness with two half-grown cubs, a pack of wild dogs, so gorged they could hardly move, continue to kill for pleasure and run on, their slavering lips dripping with blood. Overhead the vultures, full fed too, circled. There were jackals and hyenas, leopards, lynx.

And then it was over. Suddenly there was silence. Not a buck or living thing was to be seen, only the dead buck on which the aasvoels fell like stones from the sky. The plain about the wagon was a wilderness bare of everything. The grass and bush had gone, the smaller trees were hung with white hairs rubbed from the buck as they passed under them, the air heavy with the smell of buck and rotting bodies. Some that had fallen in the press had been trampled flat so that nothing was left of them but their pulverised skins and black-horned skulls.

The buck had cut a swath through the world, ravaging it like a tempest, and the water when he found it would be foul with dead buck stuck in the mud or trampled. Over everything lay the pellets of their dung, a carpet of black pebbles.

Quickly they inspanned the oxen. Their bodies were narrow as planks for lack of grass, their flanks sunk into pits near their hips for lack of water. Mounting his horse Simon led the way across the line of march away from the road, for only

THE MASK

when they had reached beyond the line of the trek would there be grass and water.

Still dazed by what he had seen, by this miracle of God's creation, Simon rode slumped in his saddle, his reins loose on the neck of his exhausted and hungry horse. Then suddenly he laughed as he thought of the witch doctor. The flood without water had been the buck. He had been right about one thing anyway.

7. The Jewel of the North

WHEN HE got beyond the devastation the buck had caused, where the veld resumed its natural, untrodden, ungrazed-out state, Simon came upon some Boers camped round a hot spring where the water came bubbling out of the black soil which they called Warmbad. Each family had some sick or crippled person with them and they told him that bathing in this mud did them much good and that some remarkable cures had been effected here. They came from all parts of the Transvaal.

Simon stayed some days with them, resting his oxen and making drawings of the more picturesque individuals, some of whom appeared to him to be all but savages, dressed in home-cured leather trousers and rough shirts. Their straggly beards were full and their hair down to their shoulders. These men never moved without their guns and told him many stories of life on the frontier and the backveld from which most of them came. They told him of lions and tigers, of elephants, of wild Kaffirs—the knob noses, the red or naked Kaffirs who wore nothing—of Mosilikatze's warriors who still swept down from the north in their raids, of the Bavenda, of Coenrad Buys, the white renegade who with a multitude of African wives had founded a bastard dynasty in the Blaumberg.

Simon had met many other farmers but they settled along the transport routes that led from the south to the north, had lived more or less as other men. But these people lived by their guns alone. What they did not grow they did not have. Their

simple needs of powder, shot, sugar, and coffee, they traded for, coming into one of the scattered stores once or twice a year, or buying from the smouses, the bold Jews who travelled over every trail with their goods loaded on to pack donkeys. They bought also some soft goods from which their wives made their clothes and kappies, or sunbonnets, and their men's shirts, but for the rest, all the things that most men deemed necessary to life, they went without. A few pots and pans, a few blankets supplemented by karosses of sewn skins, some carpenters' tools and their Bibles and guns. This was the sum of their possessions. With these and their wagons they were at home. Having more they might have had less. For they were free of all Africa. It had no bounds for them. They all had small herds of cattle, some goats, sheep, riding horses, and hunting dogs. Simon's wagon caused some comment, being the finest they had ever seen, particularly the wide iron tyres on its wheels which appeared to them as a wonderful innovation.

Each day Simon watched the sick stagger down to the springs with the aid of sticks, or rough crutches, or being carried by their relatives. Some young men were always away hunting for meat and at night when they congregated about the fires to talk, to sing folk songs and hymns, the predicant, who lived in a small house near the single store, often came to talk and pray with them. There was at this time no minister of religion living farther north and people came great distances to be married or have their children baptised, often waiting till they had several and thus saving journeys of hundreds of miles.

The hot springs lay at the foot of the Waterberg, a range of no great height but rugged and rough with hills like a crumpled cloth covered with thorn bush, and bigger trees, with aloes both short and tall that climbed the mountain sides. There were swift streams in the valleys and the rough road

which was cluttered with rocks had to be negotiated with care. There were steep descents, and upgrades that strained the oxen, but all of it with a wild beauty that Simon had not seen before. Having crossed the berg he found a few scattered farmers and hunters living either in their wagons or in harte-beest houses as they were called, made of sods laid on poles, that were really no more than huts. But the cattle here were fat, and game abounded. Several times he heard lions but had no trouble from them, and once he reached the northern flats his wagon made good speed, and the journey into the north proceeded without incident till he came to the Nyl River drift, where he found a wagon outspanned and met its owner, Herman Potgieter, the great elephant-hunter who had traded his goods for the cattle he was taking north to run with those of a native chief named Mapela who he said had agreed to take care of them on a share basis—the use of their milk and a proportion of the calves born to the cows.

When Simon said his name was van der Berg, Potgieter said, "You must be related to Swart Piet. He was my father's friend whom I remember as a child."

Simon said, "He was my grandfather's brother—my great uncle."

"Then you are welcome indeed, young man, for here your name will be held in honour."

"Perhaps that is why I came, Menecr," Simon said, "for I have heard tales of the North since I was a little boy and have hankered to see its wonders."

"You will see them," Herman said, "and what is more, your powder and lead will fetch good prices, for we are always short of it. So much so that when we shoot anything we cut out the bullets and remelt them to use again."

Potgieter was a big, hard-bitten man with piercing black eyes, a black beard and moustache. He appeared to be about thirty years of age and in his prime. His home, he said, was

at Schoemansdal, but he was seldom there since he hunted over a wide area, even going north-west into the country of the Matabele with whom he had a kind of personal treaty.

When he left, Simon was sorry, but he accepted his invitation to hunt with him later on and thought it would be wonderful to see the country under the guidance of a man who possibly knew more about it than any other man alive, for this was Potgieter's reputation. Simon had heard of it even at the Cape. This was a good augury for the future and as he camped by the river flowing so peacefully between its reedy banks, as he watched the water birds and smoked his pipe, a great content flowed over him.

The Nyl rose in a great vlei or swamp below the Waterberg which must once have been a lake. Reed buck abounded in the tall marsh grass and in the surrounding flats there were hartebeest, wildebeest, giraffe, zebra and the greater beasts of prey that fed upon them. Much of this area was covered with thorn scrub but there were low rises, islands as it were, that stood out in the periodic floods. They had been created by the ants which were washed down in a tight ball clustered around their queen. These colonies raised the level in these relatively high spots still higher by bringing up the earth from the depths, which, melting into mud with subsequent downpours, created these formic beachheads. Here other kinds of trees grew, not only thorns, but giant euphorbias, or near trees—the nabooms of the Boers, seringas, and flat-topped grey vaalbos whose bark the natives used for tying the thin twig crossbars to which they fastened the long grass that thatched their huts.

In the distance a baboon barked. A baby baboon screamed as its mother spanked it. Probably there was a tiger abroad seeking a meal of baboon flesh. This was Africa, where one thing preyed on another. Where the law was cat or be eaten, where only the fit and strong survived whether they were men or beasts.

THE JEWEL OF THE NORTH.

Simon gazed at the great stars pinpricking the dark blue heavens above him. Holes in the cloak of the night through which God watched all that went on below. This was his fancy and with these thoughts went his imaginings, following Herman Potgieter's progress to the north with his great wagon, his cattle, wending their herded way over the bushveld, pausing to graze, diverging as they came to clumps of impenetrable scrub. He thought of the wild Kaffirs with whom Potgieter associated, of the chief who grazed his cattle, and this whole vastness which was the end of the white man's world of the south, and the black man's world of the north—a strip of land where two races of men met in an endless ebb and flow as if they were two seas.

The light of his fire gleamed on the shining polished iron tires of his wagon, flecking them with the blood of its reflected flames. His dog Wagter pushed its cold nose into his hand as if sensing his feeling of being alone, in an emptiness hitherto unimaginable to him, where dangers and experiences were not occasional accidents but events of daily occurrence. It was strange to think that in all this area where usually springbok abounded not a single one was left. He wondered how far the trek of buck had gone and what prompted them to travel. A man from northern Europe, a Swede, had told him of lemmings, a kind of large rat, in his country doing the same thing, becoming seized with a desire to move, and moving in their thousands till they precipitated themselves into the sea. Unable to sleep, Simon got out his sketchbook and looked again at his drawings of Sybella, and then, as if to offset his thoughts, turned to the Bible his father had given him and read from it till the firelight began to fail. The boys put on more wood. The canopy of the branches of the three thorns under which he was camped were illuminated by the sudden flare as the dry wood caught. The slow water in the drift caught bloody fire and ran as if flecked with blood and seemed suddenly menacing

and dangerous. Then, with his loaded gun beside him, Simon climbed on his wagon and went to sleep.

Next day he overtook a despondent family who had been caught like himself in the springbok trek, but less lucky than he, since they were travelling with a flock of seven hundred bastard sheep and had lost their entire wealth. When the buck had passed, following the trek they had come upon the woolly fragments of their sheep which had starved, and been trodden into the dust by a myriad sharp plodding hoofs. Potgieter had passed them with his cattle in the dawn and had suggested that they go back to Schoemansdal and join him there. But they had been unable to make up their minds, still staggered by their loss.

"Meneer," Magda Bezuidenhout said, "a week ago we were rich. All we had was in these sheep that we had traded from the Kaffirs and were driving south. Now we have nothing but our wagon, a span of oxen, a gun, some ammunition, a bag of Boer meal, some coffee, sugar, salt and biltong."

Her husband, Jan, a strong young man with yellow hair and bold blue eyes, said, "We must not fear. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. We must trust in the Lord our God."

Simon advised them to accept Potgieter's offer. He had not struck him as a man who made such suggestions lightly. And so they inspanned, turned their wagon, and went back on their own spoor in his company. They passed a mountain which contained the iron from which the Kaffirs smelted for their spearheads and axes and their long whips clapped in the silence of the veld, sent khorans up screaming into the air, raised coveys of partridge which skimmed the tops of the long grass like the flat skipping stones over the water and sank into it without a sound, lost in its rolling waves.

This was the first time Simon had seen destitution—men with nothing—and he realised that what he himself possessed

THE JEWEL OF THE NORTH.

was held only by luck and the strength of his arms. What good was a rich father and a great farm of fat rolling vineyards a thousand miles away? A thousand miles in space, and six months or more in time, and every hour the plodding feet of his draft oxen were taking him three miles farther away, driving him like a nail still deeper into the northern flank of Africa, the unknown continent that had been the home of his race for two hundred years.

They now began to see smoke, and scattered houses that were real dwellings, not just shacks of sods and poles. They met mounted men going about their business with their guns in their hands, for even here a man and his weapons were seldom separated. Schoemansdal was five miles away. Three miles. Two miles—and then they came to it. A neat smiling village. A little jewel of white-washed houses and flowering gardens set among the foothills of the mountains that were the bastions of the north.

Schoemansdal was a beautiful little town, bigger at that time than either Bloemfontein or Potchefstroom. It was laid out in rectangular blocks with streets whose gutters ran with water led down in a great furrow from the mountains. The gardens of fruit trees—peach, guava, quince, apple, pear, fig and banana—were all hedged and no cattle or pigs were allowed in the streets. There was a church of brick with four doors and eight windows. A courthouse, several trading stores and water-mill for grinding corn. Several hundred souls, including men, women and children, lived here, and the community was rich—selling mealies, manna, beans, honey, dried fruits, spirits, hides, salt, butter in barrels, and cheese from the farms. But the produce of the hunters in the hills—ivory, rhinoceros horn, hippopotamus teeth, buffalo horns and ostrich feathers to the extent of thousands of pounds in value each year—were the backbone of its commerce.

Since hunting was the main occupation of the men Simon

had no difficulty in disposing of his powder and lead and decided to return to Pietermaritzburg or Queenstown for more of the same type of goods, after resting his oxen for a month and buying some spare cattle to replace those that had broken down. He was proud of his venture, and loading his wagon with the local exports of ivory, giraffe skins for whips, ostrich feathers, set out for the south again, leaving many new friends behind him and telling them that on his return he would join Herman Potgieter and hunt elephant with him, for this was now his ambition but first he felt he must prove himself still further by these new trading journeys, by which he would not only gain experience but perfect his shooting both from the ground and saddle.

The sixteen oxen stood pair by matched pair in their yokes. The voorlooper sat waiting in the road with the leaders' riems in his hands.

"Come on," Simon shouted.

The driver clapped his whip over the black shining backs. The voorlooper stood up. The oxen took the strain, heaving in their yokes. The great wheels began to turn, to roll.

"Kom trek—Loop loop, you skelms," the driver screamed. "Rooiland . . . Witberg . . . Engelsman." The oxen he called moved faster. Simon was on his way south. Schoemansdal lay behind him.

8. Ships that Pass in the Night

SCHALK AND his party reached Schoemansdal about three months after Simon van der Berg had left. Sybella had heard of him along the road, having made inquiries here and there. Many had seen the young man from the Cape with his red roan stallion and his dogs. Several showed her pictures he had painted of them and her heart was high when they reached their destination, for surely he would be here. When she found he had gone but would be back her Boer patience took command of her fluttering heart. Yes, she could wait. Wait as well as any other.

Schalk Fourie created something of a sensation. Who was this masked man who arrived with a mounted bushman at his side—a small yellow man who never left him or took his eyes from the master that he followed like a dog at heel? Schalk saw the field cornet in command and was given land, and he hired two men to build him a small house. While it was going up he lived in his wagon with his daughter, with his people camped beside him—a small tribe of Cape coloured folk, men women and children, all of whom seemed to regard him as a father. Sybella, beautiful and exotic to these ruder northern people, was another mystery which many young hunters tried to solve. The name was another thing, for Schalk would give no name.

“What need has a faceless man of a name?” he said. Nor would he let Sybella or his servants talk. “I am the masked

man," he said, and they said, "We are the servants of the masked man." So the mystery grew but he had money to pay for labour, was the best shot these hunters had ever seen, a fine horseman and therefore a good burgher, a good neighbour to have, and a fine fighting man, should it ever come to fighting on this border as it had on others. He spoke of the Kaffir wars he had been in as a boy and young man, and all were impressed.

But his arrival caused endless discussion. A new subject was always exciting in such an isolated community. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this man whose age no one could determine—for though he seemed old in some ways, his seat on a horse was that of a young man—was the food he ate. He lived like a bushman on game alone, without bread or coffee, drinking only water. But he also ate small animals, roots, flying ants, locusts, lizards, caterpillars and other insects.

When they spoke to him about it he laughed and said, "I was once on the point of death and my bushman saved me. I ate what he ate and since then have lived as he lives, for I am no longer a white man or even a man at all. This is my answer to disaster—to go back into a past where men could live without the things that we deem so necessary, where men are judged by what they can resist in hardship, rather than upon their riches and appearance."

He hunted with his bushman and one or two of his armed servants, never taking a guide or asking advice, and his results were astonishing. The range at which he killed game and the accuracy of his shooting were the talk of the hunters at many a fire. He was away most of the time, leaving his daughter in charge of his people and his dogs. Schalk knew very well that since Sybella's heart was fixed upon a man who was gone but would return, he need have no fear about leaving her alone with the others who came courting her.

One boy, Frikkie van Rensler, formed a great attachment for Schalk and followed him whenever he could, even going hunt-

ing with him sometimes. Schalk found himself as fond of the boy as he was of his own son Jan who was his best friend. For when, once, he saw him without his mask and did not turn away in horror, he said, "Frikkie, you are the first who is not of my blood or my people who has seen me as I am, and you are not afraid and do not turn away."

The boy said, "Meneer, you are a man, and a man is more than a face."

Thus a still greater friendship sprang up between them, and the boy knowing the old man's love of honey, determined to make him such a gift of it as had never been seen before.

Schalk had bought a salted blue-grey shooting-pony—a mare seven years old that reminded him of his beloved Papegaai. He paid a high price for her because having recovered from horse sickness, the curse of the low and middle veld, she was now immune to the disease. Already well trained and used to gunfire she soon took to his ways of hunting. His bushman hunted on foot. The other boys were mounted and soon got used to this new way of life, so different from that of farm hands in the Colony. There were plenty of elephants in the foothills of the Zoutpansberg and in the forests of the mountains but they were somewhat wild from being hunted, and here Schalk's skill in shooting stood him in good stead for he could shoot them when they imagined themselves safely out of range. The Boer method was to find a herd in the open and shoot in the knee the bulls with good tusks, thus laming them, pinning them down and coming back when the herd was finally dispersed to finish them off—this work he usually left to his boys. Sometimes it took as many as fifty shots to bring them down. His gun was the usual four-pounder, firing a four-ounce bullet—the four to the pound, which gave these *roers* their name.

Schalk's interest was in himself, in the change that had come over him with the loss of his countenance. It seemed to him that a man was a face, the face in which the men he met could

discern, or thought they could discern, the manner of man they were meeting. Faceless, characterless, nameless, his closest friend the bushman who had saved him, Schalk was coming to live a life much closer to the animals he hunted than to the white men with whom he would in other circumstances have associated. He knew himself both feared as a man separated from others by his misfortune, and respected because of his apparent wealth and hunting skill. In one of the competitions in shooting so dear to the Boers he carried off every prize, and then gave his winnings—a fat pig, a heifer and an ox—to those who had come nearest to him, and refused to shoot again because he considered it unfair.

He said, "Friends, brother Boers, God has given me this gift, it may be in some measure to compensate me for my loss, and perhaps one day it may be of service to you. 'Till that time comes I shoot alone, and travel alone—an outcast through this other act of God."

By then all men knew of his disfigurement and its cause, though little of his past, save that they were prepared to take his word that he was a God-fearing and respectable man who read the Bible and neither drank nor swore.

His relations with Sybella and Jan were closer than those of most men with their children, for these two loved him. The girl for bringing her closer to her lover and the northern wilds which it had been her ambition to see. The boy because he was his father's son, a hunter born and bred and in love with this wild life where a boy was a man as soon as he could handle arms and a horse.

The past had faded from Schalk's mind. He found it hard to believe that he had ever been that other man. He even began to understand Jacoba's motives in wanting to destroy him. He had never been the man for her. His big loutish sons he continued to despise and wondered how he had begotten them.

On Sundays he rode with his family to church in the dorp if

he was not away hunting. During the week Sybella smoked and salted the game her father brought back—it was too hot to make biltong—preserved the various kinds of fruit—watermelon, guavas, oranges, given her by the women with established gardens, attended to her poultry, listened to the tales that were told her about this frontier to which she had come, gave her brother lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic, and dreamed of the man she loved while she waited for his return from the south. This was the lot of most of the hunters' wives and families. As a rule there were few men at home. Those who remained in the village were the very old, beyond work or hunting, or men resting after a long trip into the bush, and the sick. There were always some sick with fever, malaria being a curse of this miniature Eden which no one at that time associated with the mosquitoes that bred in the water furrows and the small dams that fed their gardens.

There were several stores run by Goanese Indians who had come in from Mozambique, and many southern traders had agents in the north who bought the horns, skins, feathers, and ivory brought in by the hunters and financed those unable to pay their own way.

In six months the family of the masked man had been accepted into the community; the talk reaching flood tide in the first weeks had now died down as other events such as talk of more trouble among the Kaffirs mounted. For this little town, this northern outpost of the white southern civilisation, was surrounded by natives who if they turned hostile might overwhelm it before help came. But trade continued, skins, horns, ivory, feathers, and spirits distilled from peaches continued to flow south and ammunition and trade goods for domestic and Kaffir consumption continued to come in with the wagons in exchange for them.

Sybella or her maid were quick to meet these transport riders and got occasional news of Simon from the few who had

seen or heard of him. While she waited her life passed in a routine of duty and woman's work. She did not care for the young men who rode up to court her. They reminded her too much of her brothers. They were coarse, hairy, smelling of sweat and beasts. They seemed unable to speak or to listen, but were inarticulate with desire. And her great friend became young Frikkie van Rensler, who one day she felt would become a great man, a leader both tender and bold. It was in these directions that she tried to lead him as she told him of Simon van der Berg, the trader and artist she had met at the Cape.

9. The Honey Cliff

FRIKKIE VAN RENSLER was fourteen years old, a tall, freckled, red-haired boy with big hands, feet, and bony wrists that promised much greater growth. He would be a big man one day. In two years—at sixteen—he would become a full burgher of the Republic, and entitled to a farm of his own. In the meantime he hunted with his old friend Schalk, whom he called Oupa—Grandfather—worked on his father's farm and spent much time searching for honey and wax which he sold on his own account. He was much interested in bees. In their organisation and industry. And whenever he saw a honey bird fluttering from branch to branch and calling him he followed it to the nest in a hollow tree or rock cleft that it had found, sharing the loot with the messenger who hopped about eating the bee grubs.

In his mind for several years he had had a secret project. This was the robbing of some bees' nests in a kloof about five miles from the town. The bees here lived in a cave, undisturbed since the last bushman had been killed, and the combs were believed to be enormous—great sheets six feet high and more than that in depth.

The caves were high up in the kloof where the krans had split. The gap was three feet or so wide, and running back no man knew how far. The reason these combs had not been taken was the danger involved. Long ago the bushmen had driven hardwood pegs into the cliffside to form a kind of ladder

that led to the cave, but many of them were rotten and no one dared attempt making such a precarious climb. No boy that is, and the men were too busy with bigger things—the hunting of elephants, hippo, giraffe and buffalo—to waste time on such a project.

But Frikkie had a plan. For nearly a year he had been working on it, slowly boring out the rotten pegs in the cliff and replacing them. The lowest he had hidden under a bush so that no one could use his work to get there before him. He had already looked into the crevice and seen the combs hanging like great organ pipes above him, thick sheet after thick sheet of them, representing fifty years of bee industry. An unbelievable amount of wax and honey. He was going to cut them out and drop them down. Much honey would be lost but there was no other way and he would continue coming time after time till the job was done.

This was the day he would begin. His pony was loaded with empty bags for the wax and containers for the honey. He had torches of grass wrapped with hessian that he would light before he started climbing and carry up with him to smoke the bees.

Altogether he was delighted with his idea which had a certain perfection and was planned in every detail. The transport was his buckskin pony, the climb would be easy with his new pegs. Then the smoking operation, and finally the loading of his loot.

Now Oupa, the old masked man he loved, would have more honey than he could eat—several months' supply. To-morrow he would take it to him. Already he felt the old man's pleasure. The warmth of his handgrip when he handed him the honey-filled gourds. What a man. What a friend. How much he had taught him that would be of value when he was older. Then there was the girl. She was a little older than he, but he loved her. He had never seen anyone so beautiful. And in pleasing her father he would please her too.

Reaching the kloof below the krans he tied his pony to a tree, got out the hidden pegs and pushed them home. Then he climbed down and with a flint and steel lit his smouldering torch and began to climb again. Everything went well, heights did not bother him, until he reached the crevice. Then the outcropping piece of rock, on which he put his weight to pull himself in, gave way. For an instant he hung poised, balanced on the topmost peg, groping at the cliff wall with his fingers. Then he fell, his hands grasping at the rough cliffside. A small bush growing out of the rocks almost held him and then came out roots and all, like a rotten tooth, and he fell with a shower of loose earth on to a narrow shelf where he felt his back break as it struck a big loose stone that lay upon it.

He lay there all that day and night, alternately half conscious and fainting.

The next day his parents became anxious. His father went first to the masked man's house. He met Sybella and said, "Is Frikkie here?"

"Frikkie?" she said, pushing her dark hair back from her face. "No, he's not here."

"Is your father here?"

"Ja," she said, "he is here."

"Tell him I would like to see him."

"Ja, Meneer," she said. As she went to find her father she moved the coffee pot forward on the fire.

"Meneer van Rensler is here," she said to her father.

"To see me?"

"Ja, to see you, Pa. Frikkie is lost. He did not come in yesterday. Nor last night."

"He may be hunting," her father said.

"He did not take his gun but his horse is gone."

Schalk came through the house from the garden at the back to see his visitor.

"You have not seen Frikkie?" Van Rensler said.

"Not for two or three days."

"I wonder where he can be?"

He gulped the coffee Sybella put into his hand and turned away. "We must search," he said. "Before God we must search. It is in my heart that something has happened to him."

"Go," Schalk said, "call out everyone. You take the south, east and west with your commando. I will get my boys and take the north which is where we go together. He may be there." He put his horn to his mouth to call his boys. They came running.

"Saddle up," he said, "the klein baas is lost."

In ten minutes all the horses were there, including Sybella's grey.

Van Rensler galloped off to tell the field cornet and raise his party.

Schalk turned his horse to the north and, followed by his three hunters and Sybella, galloped into the bush country where he usually took Frikkie to teach him the tricks of hunting

The commando from the dorp divided into three sections and rode in wide open order over the east, west and south. They rode easily with long stirrups, their guns in their hands.

It was Smit who found the yellow pony still standing tethered to a small marula tree. It had stripped the bark in its hunger and there was a pile of scattered dung behind it. He fired a shot in the air and men came galloping towards him from all sides. Dismounting, they threw the reins over their horses' heads—like this they would stand—and spread out on foot looking for the boy's spoor. They soon found the little path he had made in his coming and going to the kloof.

"The bee kloof," they said. They knew of his love of bees.

"Magtig," his father said. "He may be stung to death—for the black African bees are very savage."

THE HONEY CLIFF

Then they heard a weak cry from above them. Frikkie had heard the shot and knew help was near. Now they would save him.

"We are coming," they shouted. "Are you hurt?"

"Ja, I am hurt," he said. "I cannot move."

Stoffel Coetzee, a young hunter who was very slightly built began to climb the pegs. Soon he was above the boy, able to look down on him, but not to reach him.

Frikkie had fallen sideways and the shelf on which he lay was fifteen feet from the nearest peg. Stoffel said, "Are you all right Frikkie? Can you hang on?"

"I can hang on," the boy said. "God be thanked you came. I thought I should die here."

"Are you badly hurt?"

"My back," the boy said. He touched his legs. "I can feel nothing."

"We'll get you from above," Coetzee said.

From above he shouted down to the others. They ran back to their horses and galloped off to make a detour that would bring them into the hills above the boy. By the time he had got down and followed them they had undone the riems that the horses wore twisted around their head collars and knotted them into a single rawhide rope.

"I'll go down," Stoffel Coetzee said. "I am the lightest here."

They fastened the end of the riem to a tree and he lowered himself over the edge of the precipice. But when he was on a level with the entrance of the cave the bees attacked him. They had paid no attention to the boy coming up from below but this was the path they took into the mountain pastures where they went to suck the honey from the flowers and shrubs that grew there.

In a second it seemed to watchers that Stoeffel was black with bees. He gave a wild scream, slipped, and the riems,

unable to take the jerk of his full weight, broke, and he fell. Some men at once mounted their horses and galloped back to the valley to get him.

"Now what shall we do?" Frikkie's father said.

"What can we do?" the field cornet said. "We must make another plan. We have lost one man already."

Someone said, "Let us pray."

So they knelt and prayed on the hilltop with their guns on the ground beside them.

"Help me," the boy cried. "For God's sake help me. I am in agony."

They could see his face contorted with pain on the shelf below them.

"A rope," the field cornet said.

Two men galloped off to the village for a rope. The others sat by their horses smoking and trying to think of a plan to rescue the boy. Of what use was a rope with the angry bees ready to attack anyone who came down it?

"We will wait till dark," the boy's father said, "then I will go down."

This seemed to be the best plan, to go at night while the bees slept.

They waited for the sun to go down and the rope to come. There was no rope in the town, but the men who had gone back for it brought six trektous, the platted rawhide thongs that were used to tie the oxen to the disselbooms of the traders' wagons. They would certainly be strong enough.

As darkness fell van Rensler tied one end of the line about his waist and with a flaming torch in his hand went over the side toward the boy who lay fifty feet below him. By now the boy was crying, "Kill me. Will someone please kill me. I can't stand any more."

His father reached the shelf and stood beside his son. When he attempted to lift him Frikkie screamed. Then the shelf

began to collapse beneath the man's feet and he found himself clinging to the cliffside. The men above him began to haul him up.

"My God," he said. "I had him, ja, magtig, I had him in my arms . . ."

Some women had joined their men now with blankets and food, and above the dying boy a camp was established, with fires burning brightly and food cooking in the pots. All night they sat listening to the moans of the boy below them. Dawn broke and now they could see him again.

"Shoot me," cried Frikkie when he saw their heads peering over the edge of the cliff. "Magtig, for the love of God, shoot me."

"Shoot him?" they said. "How can we shoot one of our boys?"

"I'll try again," his father said. But before he was anywhere near the boy the bees attacked him and he was drawn up again.

The men drew together in a group. "Shoot him. Ja, if it was me I'd say shoot me," one of them said. "But who can do it? Who will?"

The women were crying into their aprons.

"Is it lawful?" someone asked the field cornet.

He was silent for a while and then said, "It is lawful, though before God never have I taken such a decision before."

"Then do it," someone said. "It's your job. You are the field cornet."

"I cannot," he said. "I have not the strength."

"Shoot me," the boy kept crying. "Someone please shoot me. Magtig," he said, "among all you hunters is there not one bold enough to end this for me?"

Everyone was peering down over the cliff but turned when they heard a thunder of hoofs behind them. Schalk and his party swept up. The old masked man still sitting straight in his

saddle. His black horse, General, was streaked and curded with white sweat. Behind him came his bushman, his coloured hunters and Sybella—the dark girl with flying hair who rode like a man, this strange man's daughter.

The people looked at the newcomers almost resentfully. They were not true Schoemansdalers. They were strange—different.

Schalk threw his leg over the black stallion's neck and slipped to the ground. His people dismounted behind him. "So you've found him," he said.

They were silent. What was there to say? Of course they had found him.

"I rode through all the places we hunted," Schalk said, "and came back. There I heard the news, changed horses and came on."

No one said a word. Only from below them came the cry, "Shoot me, for our dear Lord's sake end this."

Schalk went to the cliff's edge and looked down.

The boy saw him. "Oupa," he cried, "Oupa at last. You will do it. You will end this. I wanted the honey for you."

Schalk drew back, went up to the field cornet and said, "What is this?"

"We have lost one good man," the field cornet said, "from the bees. His father was almost killed when the shelf collapsed beneath him in the night. We have decided that his wish must be carried out. He is hurt beyond all help."

Schalk stood very straight. His leather mask turned as he surveyed the group through its eyeholes. "This is your will?" he asked. "And you?" he turned to the boy's father. "You—what do you say?"

"I say do it. For God's sake let someone do it. Can I do it? Can a man be asked to end the life he has begun?" Sobs strangled him.

"And the law?" Schalk said. "What is the law?"

"There is no law here but what we make. The will of the folk is the law."

"Then let us pray," Schalk said.

And again they all knelt on the dry mountain grass that was tramped flat by their waiting. When the others got up Schalk was still on his knees.

At last he rose and went to the cliff again. "Frikkie," he said, "are you sure?"

"Ja, I am sure. I ask you to do it, I pray you, Oupa. With you I am not afraid."

"The field cornet said he could do it. He is the finest shot in the Zoutpansberg. Did he not win the pig, the ox and the heifer?"

Schalk came back to them. "I will do it," he said, "because I am a fine shot. Perhaps it was for this God gave me this gift. Perhaps it is the price I must pay. I will do it because I am a stranger here, beloved of none but the boy I must kill, because I am nameless, faceless, no longer a man. This is but another weight placed upon my soul, for though none of you dare do it, though you all desire it, yet when it's done my presence will be anathema. You will forget the reason and only remember the deed."

He took his gun from the bushman and returned to the cliff. "Frikkie," he called.

"Oupa," the boy said.

"Close your eyes, my son. Consign yourself to God in heaven."

Schalk lay down and raised his gun. No one breathed. The only sound was the champing of the horses' bits.

Then it came. With a crash like thunder the shot rang out. There was no scream, no sound but the noise of the boy's body as it fell.

Schalk cleaned the barrel of his gun and reloaded. No one

THE MASK

said a word as he took the reins of his black horse, mounted and rode away with his people behind him.

When he had gone the boy's father and the people went down to get the body. Above them the victorious bees hummed about their nest—the myriad victors of a battle they never knew that they had fought.

10. God Must Eat

NOT FAR from the town of Schoemansdal in the mountains momentous things were taking place. The Kaffir chiefs Mapela and Makapan were meeting. The great kraal was disturbed, active. A thousand cooking fires sent up their smoke into the still, blue sky; naked maidens carried great red pots of newly fomented beer upon their heads, young warriors dressed in the plumes and panoply of war, with assegais and kerries in their hands, marched through the village strutting like game cocks waiting for the word they knew would come.

Soon their spears would drink blood and eat flesh. Soon the white men, the disturbers of their peace, would be gone—driven like chaff before the wind of their onrush. The doctors would make strong medicine that would make them immune to bullets. The world, their world, would resume its normal form and there would be none to stay them save perhaps Mosilikatze's Matabele from the west who had swept the country clean as a broom of all the life that lay between them. The naked Kaffirs and the knob noses they did not fear. *Aaie*, soon there would be blood and the smell of death. Already the vultures circled the sky, an omen of the feasts to come. The movement of men, the marching, all this they had seen before.

War, and its accompaniment of looted women and cattle, was meat and drink to the young men—the aim of their creation—for what was a man who was not a warrior? Death

was not feared for the spirit lived on, escaping from the opened belly of the body. Wounds were not feared for their badly wounded they clubbed and ripped open. The young men looked with respect at the old warriors, the captains and indunas whose bodies were scarred with ancient wounds, like old dogs whose chewed hides and missing ears made them more valued for their wisdom in hunting than young whole dogs. Dogs, were they not the king's dogs, straining at the leash of obedience, growling to themselves and at each other, their eyes red as their lusts mounted to the wild beat of the drums. For drums are the heartbeat of Africa, the strange pulse that animates a continent.

A man danced alone intoxicated by his own virility, clashing his weapons together, leaping, stabbing, jumping back from an imaginary foe. Conscious of men preparing for battle, the maidens swayed their hips making the little skin aprons they wore over their shining buttocks sway. Sweat poured from the drummers who, wild-eyed, lost in the hysteria of their drumming, beat out their rhythm. Oxen were being slaughtered and the blood caught in baskets so neatly plaited that not a drop escaped while the animals, still living, bellowed in their slow agony. Cur dogs licked their chops in anticipation of scraps to come as they cowered, their tails between their legs, as near as they dared to the food that was being prepared. On wide pinions the vultures and kites swung lower.

The chiefs Mapela and Makapan, dressed in kilts of tiger skin, were seated on low carved stools, their captains and indunas assembled close behind them. It was dark now and a great fire flamed before them, for the night was cold.

Mapela said, "The plan is made. We who have been enemies are now brothers, allied against our common foe."

Makapan raised his right hand. "It is agreed," he said, "even to the day. When the moon is full the second time we

strike. Our sorcerers agree and there could be no better sign, for when in the history of nations have the witch doctors of two tribes prophesied alike before?"

Mapela laughed deep in his chest, showing his teeth which split the darkness of his face in two. "On the day that follows the second fullness of the moon," he said.

A wizened creature, in no way resembling a man, came forward. He was dressed in a cloak of dried snake-skins and inflated bladders that looked like balloons bounced on his shoulders. A girdle of human jaw bones interspersed with the carapaces of small dried tortoises hung about his loins. In a hand that was like a claw he carried a long fresh-peeled wand. Insinuating himself, almost on his hands and knees, between the two kings, he cried in a high thin voice, "One thing remains, oh lords of creation, oh black bulls, sires of a thousand calves, oh eaters up of the land, oh locusts armed with spears, oh scorpions whose tails are raised to sting . . ."

"And what is that, Negende, father of all evil?" Mapela asked.

"Sacrifice," the creature whined. "Death. So that we can make the medicine of victory. Death to appease the gods of war and give them a taste of what is to come. A messenger must go into the world of spirits and bid them prepare. War," he screamed. "Blood."

"Blood then," Mapela said. "You shall have your blood. Your human parts, your livers and lungs, and the secret parts from which you compound your foul medicines."

"Blood," the creature said again. "Did the king not see his children to-day? The vultures, flying low asking for their portion. Aaie," he said, "they are wise birds who see the gathering of men for war from afar. Who see the shining spears and close in for the feast. Let them have the first fruits while I work to make my muti."

As they heard the witch doctor's words the drummers

changed their tone. The drums which had been muted now roared again, filling the night with their vibrations so that they echoed in the hills.

"To-morrow," the witch doctor said. "To-morrow as the sun rises over the hills."

"To-morrow then, at dawn," Mapela said.

"To-morrow God must eat," the witch doctor screamed.

All night by the leaping fires the people danced to the music of the drums. They drank beer, ate the half-cooked quivering flesh of the newly slaughtered cattle, and prepared themselves for the following day by smearing themselves with red and yellow clay mixed with fat, and painting white zebra-like stripes upon their bodies.

All night the kraal hummed like a hive with noise and movement. Here a man honed his spears. There another danced till he fell exhausted, foaming at the mouth. There was no sleep in the village save for the children who now lay curled up exhausted, like black puppies on their mats in the round beehive huts.

But the doctor and his assistants were busy. They had found their victim. A strong young man related to no one of importance who would be slow in dying. Already they had broken his legs and, as the sun rose, painting the eastern sky with pink, silhouetting the jagged peaks, accompanied by the whole tribe they climbed the sacred hill of Modimulle that rose out of a small plain set high up in the mountains. This was the abode of God and so sacred that no one dared even cut for thatch the long grass that grew at its foot.

In front of the procession the witch doctor wearing a carved mask that covered his face, danced slowly, uttering wild screams. Behind him came his assistants, also masked, dragging their victim by the arms, his broken legs sagging behind him. Then came two men carrying a great basket between them on shoulder poles.

The people knew what it contained though few had seen it opened. This was the living magic of the tribe.

Behind the doctors came the two kings dressed in kilts of leopard tails accompanied by the captains and the lesser chiefs. After them trailed the people. First the warriors dressed for war. Then the women and girls and children, either walking or in cradle skins upon their mothers' backs—and finally the old and sick who, though near to death themselves, still wished to see a young man die.

Full day had come now. The sun shone over the land and the dewdrops sparkled like diamond prisms as they hung on the long grass that bordered the narrow path that led twisting like a red snake up the hill, used only, except on rare occasions such as this, by the doctors who often came to this sacred place to consult their secret oracles and perform the rites that protected the tribe from danger by propitiating the gods with sacrifice. It was a year since a man had been killed here publicly.

At last the summit was reached. A flat bare outcrop of iron-stone washed clean by a thousand storms, struck a thousand times by lightning. Beyond this flat space the koppie fell in a steep kran, a cliff whitened by the excrement of the vultures that nested on its narrow ledges.

At the edge of the cliff the boldest, who looked over, could see the whitened bones of sacrificed men and beasts scattered among the rocks and stones below them. The horned skulls of cattle and goats, the round skulls of men, women and children that looked like white balls from above.

In the centre of a semicircle of warriors, whose open side was the cliff, the doctor's assistants dragged the man they were going to kill. Women brought the great cooking-pots they had carried up the hill, others came with wood, with pots of water, and set them to boil. And then, with great care, under the direction of the ancient wizard, his men stooped over the

THE MASK

writhing figure they held pinioned to the sun-hot rock and severed his limbs, which were thrown into the pots while the crowd cried their praises to the god they feared and worshipped. Now there was no fear of failure. Intoxicated by their own shouts, by the smell of human blood and the reek of the cook-pots, they crushed forward to watch the writhing, still living, limbless torso rolled over the edge of the cliff.

The vultures which had been circling over their heads casting great winged shadows on them as they came between them and the sun followed the body, closing their wings and falling like stones, and then opening them before they struck the ground to sail upward on a short flight and then return to the feast that had been so thoughtfully provided for them below their nesting place. A great sigh went up from the people as the man fell. It had been done. Their god would eat. No one regretted Asowa, the young man who had been killed.

The doctor's assistants, armed with staves, now drove back the crowd again to clear the space they required for the final ceremony, something that none but the oldest had seen before. The great basket was brought forward. Slowly the old wizard undid the leather thongs that held the lid. Slowly he withdrew from it the white serpent of which they had all heard, but which only a few believed actually existed. A white python. They had all seen pythons but never a white one. It was said to be the guardian spirit of the tribe.

Now there was no need to press the crowd back. They retreated at once, those nearest to it pressing against those behind them. Negende, the old doctor, wound the white snake about his neck and chest. It put up its head to gaze about, its white forked tongue flicking in and out. Everyone, including the kings and chiefs, prostrated themselves in fear, for this was a great mystery; to watch it was more than man could bear. Many women ran screaming down the hill. Even the bravest were pale before this symbol of the doctor's might,

fearful of the man who toyed with this snake as if it were a friend.

When he thought he had impressed the people enough Negende took the snake from his body, unwound it like a scarf and put it back in its basket.

Now the warriors were assembled in companies. And taking the broth from the pots, the doctor sprinkled them, rank after rank, with this medicine that would deflect the white man's bullets from their bodies and instil courage into any whose heart still wavered. The cooked human flesh was tightly wrapped into sheets of dressed skin and given to Mapela to take back to his doctors as gifts and a testament of the bond which now tied the two tribes into a compact of death to the white man, and glory to themselves.

It was over. The crowd dispersed, wending its way like a long black snake down the hill they had climbed in the dawn.

Soon nothing was left here but the bloodstains on the rocks, and below the cliff the bones picked clean by the vultures, who once again sailed the clear African sky.

In Schoemansdal everything was calm. Times were good and the marketplace in front of the church was white with piles of ivory waiting to go south on the wagons of the traders. No one seemed to notice that there were more wild Kaffirs strolling in the streets than usual, or that nothing the white men did missed their dark watching eyes. It was a month before rumours of unrest among the Kaffirs in the mountains reached any ears. But when it did it was shrugged off. There were always rumours of this kind and nothing could be more unlikely than the tale that Makapan and Mapela had made a pact of any kind, in spite of what their servants told them.

11. The Slavers

DISASTER STRUCK Simon in the valleys of Natal on his way to Pietermaritzburg where he had determined to sell his ivory and ostrich feathers because the prices there were said to be good and doing so would save him the long trip to the Coast.

Everything was going well and then suddenly all the oxen on the near side of his span reeled and collapsed. Running forward he and his boys released the strops that held them to the yokes and outspanned their mates. In an hour they were dead. Neither he nor his boys could think of the cause. Why only those on one side? If they had eaten tulp or some other poison at the last outspan death would not have been so orderly.

Then Philip, his driver, called him. "Baas, baas, kom kyk, come and look." He had the hind foot of one of the dead oxen in his hand. It was swollen and where the boy had shaved the hair with his knife was the mark of two fangs. "A snake, baas," he said. "A mamba. Only a mamba could kill eight oxen striking each in the pastern as it went by." Evidently the wagon had come between the snake and its retreat in some abandoned anthill. Disaster indeed, but it was only by the grace of God that he had been walking on the other side of the wagon.

Spare oxen were inspanned but pulled badly because they were unaccustomed to their yoke mates but within three hours the wagon was rolling on its way again. These were the risks that transport riders took but it was the first close shave that

Simon had had since he left the Cape Colony. One day, he thought, I shall tell the story of my first adventure. Ja, now when men talked of snakes as they so often did round the camp fires he would have a contribution to make. Magtig, that a snake should have so much venom was unbelievable unless one had seen it with one's own eyes.

In Pietermaritzburg he sold his produce for good prices. The feathers went well and he got eleven shillings a pound for his ivory.

He rested his oxen, bought a spare span of small Zulu cattle, and loaded his wagon again for the return journey with powder, lead and native truck as before. This time he was making for Potchefstroom which he wished to see and because he was told the road was easier. The country was sparsely populated and there was plenty of game but Simon looked forward to being among the people of the north again. The Zoutpansberg seemed to him the goal he had been seeking all his life, and this second trip nothing more than a kind of proving ground for his ability to manage his affairs, a passing of the time as it were, between his old life and new that he was going to take up. Now when he got back he would have seen as much or more of Africa than many of the hunters in Schoemansdal and after two or three hunting trips he would be their equal.

It was pleasant to be on the high veld again, on the high rolling plains of grass that were patched with herds of wildebeest and zebra.

Near Potchefstroom he met a wagon belonging to two Portuguese half-castes who said they were João Albini's men with a wagonload of slave children they were taking into town to sell. This traffic was illegal but as long as the Kaffirs were ready to steal children to sell and people were ready to buy them it was difficult to put down. The men, da Sousa and Perrera, said that the children, who were between nine and twelve years of age, fetched from fifteen to twenty pounds a

head, speaking of them as if they were cattle. Da Sousa was a thickset, pock-marked man who wore a black ostrich-plume in his hat and had a pistol stuck in his belt. Perrera was even more unpleasant; tall, thin, one-eyed, and snarled when he spoke. They seemed to be on good terms with the Kaffirs in the north to whom they had sold guns for elephant hunting, and they tried to buy ammunition from Simon because no one else would sell it to them in the town, which they were giving a wide berth because of some unpleasantness which they said had occurred there the last time they had passed this way.

One child, a small boy of ten, had looked at Simon most appealingly. Perrera who had noticed it beat him with a hippo sjambok as soon as Simon left.

As if in answer to his screams, Simon went over to their wagon and said, "Stop ill-using a child."

Perrera said, "He is ours and a cheeky young devil."

"Yours?" Simon said.

"Ja, he is mine. Si, senhor, I paid for him. He is mine to do with as I will."

"What do you want for him?"

"Fifteen pounds," Perrera said.

Simon gave him the money. "Now loose him. He is mine."

The boy flung himself at Simon's feet.

When he turned back to his own wagon Simon's heart was pounding. He had bought a slave. He could not even tell him he was free because he could not speak his language. He handed him over to Philip. "This boy will come with us," he said.

Philip said, "Ja, baas."

If his oxen had not been so tired Simon would not have spent the night in the slaver's company. As it was he slept lightly and tied his dog Wagter inside the wagon beside his bed. These men he was sure would murder him to obtain the

powder and shot he carried. But finding him prepared they made off at the first dawn with their cargo of weeping, half-starved children. Simon had heard of but never before seen these men who traded on the ill-defined border of the Republic and Mozambique and ran guns and ammunition to the Kaffirs in exchange for kidnapped children and ivory.

At Potchefstroom he met Herman Potgieter again. He was visiting there but about ready to leave.

"Welcome, my young friend," he said. "Come back with me. Sell your goods in the dorp when we arrive. Leave your wagon and boys and come with me to visit Mapela the Kaffir chief who has sent me word that there is a big herd of elephants near him which he is reserving for me, keeping all other hunters away. I also wish to count the cattle that I have running on his lands."

Simon said, "Nothing could suit me better." His oxen could do with a long rest and so could his boys. This was good fortune indeed.

He told Herman of his adventure with the mamba and of his meeting with the slavers and of the boy he had bought.

"Albini's men indeed," Herman said. "That is a lie which they could not have told to me."

Albini was a Portuguese of good family who had a fort in the low veld between Schoemansdal and Lourenço Marques where he had collected a number of knob-nose Kaffirs or Shangaans who regarded him as their chief. But he was a brave man who had often helped the Boers and was no slave dealer or gun runner.

Together the wagons now passed through the small village which was beginning to be called Pretoria after General Pretorius and which some said would one day be the capital of the Republic. This seemed most improbable but it was never wise to argue with those whose opinions were made up.

THE MASK

The village was set in a cup in the hills and had good water, this being the key to all settlement in Africa whether it was a single farm or a dorp. The wagons had come down into it with shoes on their locked wheels, skidding down the steep rocky decline and outspanned there. Simon visited many of Potgieter's friends, and then the following day climbed out again with much shouting and cracking of whips which set the baboons in the hills to barking defiance at these disturbers of their peace. Now the road would be flat until they reached Warmbad and the Waterberg again.

Once again on a road he knew, landmark after landmark becoming recognisable, Simon became happier and happier. This was his country, his land, the middle veld with its covering of scrub and tall thorn, its isolated, smooth barked marulas, its rich black clay soil now parched and cracked with the drought of winter. But the rains would come anytime now. Spring was at hand.

Potgieter said they were lucky that it had not rained because they might have had to double-span the wagons to get them through the drifts which now ran dry. In the rains torrents rushed down them, sweeping away everything in their path and, running down, left the bottoms sticky with black clay that clung to the wheels in great gobs. Sometimes the wagons sank up to their axles so that they had to be dug out. There was more game than ever now, and lions became more common so that at night they tied their oxen to the wagons and lit great fires to keep them away. *There were springbok about again, and no sign of the devastation caused by the trek that had swept past him last time he crossed the flats.

Herman Potgieter met more friends taking the waters and they spent a whole afternoon talking to an old Boer called Oom Koos who it appeared had known Hendrik van der Berg, Swart Piet, Louis Trichard, and other early pioneers. He sat in the hot black mud with his long beard floating in the

water under the rough thatch roof that had been built over him and said that in a week he would be able to ride again. He told them tales of Coenrad Buys and his folk who were now living at Mara, a koppie fifty miles to the west of Schoemansdal, and of the tribe of half-castes and bastards he had sired, and the Kaffirs who had collected about him. There were tales of hunting of lion, elephants and rhinoceros, both black and white, which they shot for the horns on their noses, which Potgieter said went to the Far East where they were in great demand as aphrodisiacs.

"Magtig," he said, "and is it not a strange idea that they should think these nose horns will make them strong in love?"

The Waterberg running almost due east-west was a range of low hills that flowed with milk, honey and fever. Wonderful cattle country but an ill place for men, only the hardest surviving, and still worse for women and children. The old man told of strange mine workings in the Rooiberg which must have been made by ancient people who had been here before the Kaffirs who had no memory of them and steered clear of the area, believing it to be bewitched.

Then, leaving Oom Koos to his cure, they pushed on again. Every day Simon became more attached to Potgieter, who seemed to him the ideal voortrekker, one of those who went in front, a strong, bold resourceful pioneer, a wonderful shot and horseman. He embodied all the virtues of the frontier. Looking at his enormous frame, at the muscles that bulged under his shirt, at the great thighs that gripped his bay horse, at the grizzled black virility of his beard, Simon felt that here was one who was more than a man, one who would not die but could only be killed in some terrible adventure. Almost immune to fever and other illness, this iron man hunted as much as two or three hundred miles away from the nearest white man in the savage and all but unknown Kaffir country. He was

familiar with all the tribes that inhabited these regions, even the Matabele—Zulus who had fled from Chaka fighting their way north and picking up women and young men and cattle as they went to strengthen their hordes. Herman knew the Bavenda who were feared almost as much, and now he was about to adventure into the interior with this man. His son, Andries, was a boy of his own age, but with little education beyond veld craft, his reading limited to the big print of the family Bible that his father always carried in his wagon. A boy who was almost a savage, who in his whole life had known no comfort or serenity, whose home when it was not a wagon was his horse's back, with the sky for his ceiling and his saddle for his pillow.

Sinon made drawings of this young man and his father and of the strange scenes that struck his fancy. He made studies of any buck they shot, so that when he went home he would be able to show his father and his friends the wonders of these northern wilds. He made sketches of the great cream of tartar trees, of the yellow barked fever trees with their delicate foliage, of Kaffirs and Kaffir women, of kraals and huts, of native cattle, dogs, sheep and goats. But hardly a day went by without his looking at the drawings he had made of Sybella. He knew that she was his heart's desire, he knew that it was to her he wished to show his pictures rather than his father, and that when he went south next year it would be to the Ouplek he would be drawn rather than Cape Town and the rich valleys of his home. Ja, he thought, I will take her with me to my father, and then having seen him we will come back and make a home in the north, leaving the soft south to his younger brother Carl who showed no taste for travel or for the new and strange.

Ja, he thought, I am a true Boer. I have my ancestors' roving blood. I am one who must know what lies over the hills and beyond the horizon, one to whom the skyline is always a

beckoning finger, an endless magnet of attraction. This was what he had in common with Potgieter, and the other Schoemansdalers.

So the wagons fought their rumbling way over the passes and through the ports of the Waterberg, crossed more flats and finally camped once more on the banks of the peaceful Nyl among the water birds which undeterred by human company continued to fish and conduct their affairs in the reeds, the bush and trees that grew upon its banks. The working oxen plunged eagerly into the water, standing knee high to drink, the slow river eddying about their legs, and then climbing out began to graze on the wide-leafed buffalo grass that grew under the spreading thorns. In ten days they would be back in the Zoutpansberg. He would sell his produce to the storekeepers, leave his boys and the stock, and go on with his new friend Potgieter into Mapela's country.

Meanwhile it was nice here. Quiet and beautiful. The men all bathed in the cool brown water, washing with soap made from rendered pig fat and wood ash lye. Once again Simon was struck by the power of Potgieter's body. It resembled those of the ancient Greek heroes he had seen in his father's books at home, but was scarred with the wounds of battle—the slashes of assegais—and torn by the horns and teeth of the animals that had tried to kill him. Not only lions and tigers were dangerous. The greater buck like the swart witpens or sable with horns like scimitars were dangerous when wounded. Andries was a slighter replica of his father. As dark, more fiery and wilder because never in his life had he known restraint. The boys—drivers, voorloopers and others—bathed downstream, their bodies merging into the brown and yellow of the sunburned veld and tall green reeds.

They remained here two days because it was so pleasant, and to shoot reedbuck whose meat Potgieter liked above all others. The boy Simon had bought never left him and followed

everywhere with his dogs. By now he knew he was free. But freedom was without value to him. Simon had named him Potch after the place where he had found him.

Potgieter was pleased with young Simon. The boy would be all right. All he needed was hardening up, but there was no need to worry about that, the chances of the chase and war, even of ordinary life up here would do it inevitably. For though most Kaffirs were friendly now, there were always roving bands who would murder white men for their guns and possessions if they thought they could do so with impunity.

Potgieter was curious about what news he would find when they reached the dorp. There should be further information of the elephants from Mapela. He wondered how his stock had done, what their increase was, and how they had held up through the drought of winter. He was looking forward to the excitement of hunting elephants again, to taking the risks that were the very core of his life, for without taking chances a man might as well be dead. He was also interested to see how Simon would turn out as a hunter. The boy could shoot and ride well but hunting elephants was a kind of war where a mistake could mean death. He had seen many men killed, tossed in the air by swirling trunks, caught and impaled on the ivory tusks they had sought. Seen them trampled under foot or knelt upon. Ja, many good men had died in this trade. Through carelessness, the overconfidence of the experienced, or stupidity, or fear in the young hunter. For the scream of a wounded elephant was awe inspiring. The clapping of the great ears as big as tables, the charge before which small saplings went down as if they were grass. Then there was always the risk of a misfire or a horse falling in an antbear hole. A thousand mischances could take place which the experienced hunter must foresee, and the young must learn to avoid if he wished to stay alive. But the rewards in money and

excitement were high for a man whose heart was bold and body strong.

By this time, among the people of Schloemansdal there was some uneasiness. Not fear or anything approaching it. But there was a feeling in the air of something about to happen, of some abnormality, of the calm before a storm. Of course people were highstrung as they always were toward the end of the winter while they waited for the rains. The heat was oppressive but the sky remained cloudless without even the small fleecy white clouds, the forerunners of rain, that built themselves slowly up into greater and greater clouds till at last they burst with the crash of thunder into torrential downpours. But it was not the weather alone. There was a tale going around that up at Mapela's kraal the white snake had been shown to the people. This had not happened since the town had been established. In fact, until now few either white or black had quite believed in its existence. A white rock python. Indeed how could there be such a thing? But Major Black, an English hunter who was on leave from India, said he had seen one there. And if in India why not here? Then there was the hunter himself. He had gone into the mountains against all advice. They had said that only men who knew the Kaffirs, such as Herman Potgieter, should go there in these times. But he had gone. That was months ago and he had not returned. Then of course there was the affair of Frikkie van Rensler and the masked man who had shot him. Before God, he was not the only man who wore a mask now. If he came into town, his black stallion tripping powerfully under his sparse straight body, for he sat as erect as a ramrod in the saddle, every face was turned away from him.

Who was he? Whence had he come? Surely to commit a deed like that a man must be a hardened criminal. It was forgotten that Frikkie had cried for death. That no one else

had dared to answer his plea. And the girl. Was she really his daughter? Was she not more likely, with a man like that, a criminal, an assassin, to be his concubine? There was now no doubt in their minds that he had murdered his wife and seized this girl. Perhaps he had killed several women. Perhaps though, ~~after~~ ^{at} all, the girl was his daughter, which was even worse, ~~and~~ their relationship incestuous. Rumour piled on to rumour, supposition became a fully substantiated fact, as the sun continued to blaze down upon this little isolated village.

Yet despite the drought, the gossip, the latent anxiety, Schoemansdal was beautiful as a green jewel afire with the hidden lights of the flowers in the gardens, set in the burned brown-casket of the hills. The water furrows ran strongly, rippling in little waves in which the children sailed the wooden boats their fathers carved for them. The peaches were beginning to blush to ripeness on the trees. The gardens were green with led water, the cattle fat, the dogs content as they scratched their fleas in the shade of the whitewashed houses.

But the eyes of the wild Kaffirs who came down from the hills to trade beeswax or ostrich feathers in the stores were hard as agates and missed nothing. They came, and they returned to report to their chiefs. But to the people one Kaffir was very much like another and they saw no change.

Up in the kraals the men were active at night as they watched the moon grow. This would be the second full moon since the meeting of the chiefs, the great day was near. The gods had eaten. The warriors had been doctored with the strongest medicine. They had seen the great whitesnake about Negende's neck and loins, and they honed their spears, speaking to them as if they were children, crooning to them the song of the blood they were so soon to taste. White blood, oh spear, oh assegai, blood that is red like that of the black man which you already know, but of a new and strange flavour. And the spears hissed back to them as they were rubbed with the soft honing stones

that were moistened with spittle. For these spears knew blood, not only that of enemies in battle, but of men killed by the smiths, who used it to temper the best of them. The smiths were a cast apart, rather more than men, and feared. For their art of changing raw iron into weapons—into spears and axes. And men walking alone had disappeared if they ventured too close to the hills, where the smiths worked their mysteries.

These warriors and their assegais were inseparable, for it was by the spear that they lived, as the white lived by their guns. This was the land of armed men—both black and white—of tooth, horn and claw, of the strong continually proving their strength against others equally strong, or stronger, and all preying upon the weak, for the weak had no more chance than a duiker feeding beneath a tree where a tiger lay hidden in the forked branches above it. Here there was neither fear nor kindness, only strength, for the gentler virtues need a gentler land. The god of the Kaffirs was Miliomo the frightful, who could only be pacified by the blood of men—and that of the Boers the terrible Jehovah of the Old Testament. To the Boers the Kaffirs were the Philistines and the children of Ham. To the Kaffirs the Boers were intruders who trod upon the soil that was sacred to their dead. The world of ghosts is near to Kaffirs for whom there is no clear separation between the quick and the dead. The spirits of his fathers are always about him. They are the Kaffir's constant company, his preoccupation and fear.

That strange beast—the horse—upon which the Boers rode as if they were oxen trod down their hunting veld, and though they relished the meat of the game the Boers killed—the elephant, buffalo and sea cow in the vlics—they still resented their power.

Now many of the Kaffirs had guns traded from half-white men who knew no honour. If such men wanted children to sell why not sell them? What after all was a child compared to a

THE MASK

gun? It was not difficult to make a child. Every Kaffir, no matter how mean or ignorant could make a child, but a gun—the magic of the white man's power—was something different, something that came from beyond a sea which no Kaffir had ever seen. Something far beyond the skill of the greatest smith and cheap at the price of a stolen child.

12. The Mark of Cain

ON HIS RIEMPI bed in his new, thatched house Schalk lay sick. His iron body had not failed him. It was his heart. First it was my wife, he thought, who shared my bed for thirty years that betrayed me. Now it is my friend, the boy who loved me and was not afraid, whom I have killed.

Oh, my son, Absalom. Oh Absalom, my son, he cried. For Frikkie had been as dear to him as Jan. Surely now he must be branded with the mark of Cain. Surely the volk were right to brand him a murderer. And was it not strange that this gift of God, this wonderful blend of mind and eye that made him such a fine shot, which had already saved his life many times out hunting, should have been turned against him?

His dogs, usually not allowed in the house, lay beside him. His bushman squatted at the foot of the bed watching him hour after hour. Here was something he understood—this pain of a man's heart which he had known so long. Ever since his wife and children had been shot down like vermin and he had escaped alone.

He knew that there was only one cure for his master—time. Time was the only medicine. When the sun had gone down and risen so many times, when the great silver moon had waxed and waned so many times, his master's heart would be healed. It would be healed, he thought, but never be quite the same, for the heart of an old man who had seen much sorrow

was scarred with the wounds of its battles. Ja, he thought, such a man's heart is like the skin of an old lion scarred with ancient fights. Bosman's dark eyes set like currants in the wrinkled yellow dough of his face were sad as he watched by the bedside.

Sybella and her brother came in and out of the room to see their father. The girl's face was swollen with tears, blotched with sorrow, for she had loved Frikkie. He had been old enough to be a friend and too young to importune her as a lover. Jan had cried too for his companion. Both children were filled with awe at the strength of this man who was their father, who had had the courage to do this thing and was now paying the price of his act. Both knew that in them the same blood ran, the same fixity of purpose, that one day they too would be able to do the strange and terrible things that life sometimes demanded of such as they. The latent strength within them frightened them. It was like discovering a lion in the house, and then finding that they had lived with a lion all their lives, but had not recognised him. More, their mother's hardness was in them too. This fierce blood was their heritage. Sybella's eyes flashed through her tears with pride at her father, with horror. For there, spread on the rough brown blanket, lay the hands that had done the deed. The hands that had made love to her mother's body, that had killed Kaffirs in war, and now had shot their friend Frikkie to end his agony.

She brought her father chicken broth and holding his head up made him drink. The girl's will at this moment was stronger than that of the man. This suffering was part of the price she must pay for adventure, the voortrekker price. Paid over and over again by so many, yet none were deterred by it. How many were dead, killed by Kaffirs and wild beasts, dying of fever, or in childbirth, yet still more came. Hardly a month passed without more men coming alone or with families all eager to prove themselves, to fight the unknown dangers of the north.

They come as we came, she thought. This is our land, our Africa.

Her father having drunk lay back and closed his eyes. The past came to his mind incident after incident. He saw his boyhood, his courting of Jacoba. How beautiful she had been. Their lovemaking, the birth of their eldest son, of the other children, of the Kaffir wars in which he had fought, the stolen cattle he had driven back to their home, the battle on the farm. How nearly they had been overwhelmed. How bravely his wife had fought at his side. How had she changed? When had this lust for power, for mastery, overtaken her? How had he allowed authority to slip from his hands? And all this was nothing now, just the dream of life that was gone in a flash. A dream—and only the terrible present in which he had killed his young friend remained. That it had been necessary did not mitigate it. That Frikkie had prayed for death did not help. He wondered if he would ever touch honey again. Then his thoughts were broken into by the bushman's voice.

"Baas," he said, "we must go."

"Go?" he said.

"Ja, baas, it is the only thing. When things go badly in one place the best plan is to move to another." The bushman's eyes were sad like those of a beaten dog. Did he too not know sorrow? Could he have continued to live if he had not left the scene of his despair, run like a hare before the pursuing hounds and at last found refuge with this white man who had become his father? This man who was more than a father to him, who in fact with his family—the young girl and boy who had accompanied him up here—were all he had.

Schalk sat up in bed. "Go?" he said. "Go where?"

"Elsewhere, master. Anywhere that is not here. Let us sleep under the stars again." The bushman had no love for houses or civilisation. "Let us leave this place and the beasts in charge of your people and trek with our horses and wagon.

Master, let us go from this place where every person, every step you take, will remind you of what you have lost, and only return when your heart has ceased to be sore."

"Magtig," Schalk said, "I think you are right." It would not be the first time his little bushman had advised him well. Move, he thought. Put more events between his past and the future, more travels, more hunts. He even regretted that there was no war in which he could engage, no wild adventure. But at any rate here was a plan of action, of movement once more. What need had such as he for a home, a house, a fixed abode? An Ishmael, an Iscariot who had betrayed his friend. Suffer the little children to come unto me, the Master had said. Suffer them. And what had he done? He had killed a child. His name, the name of the masked, nameless man, was now anathema.

"Sybella," he shouted. "We shall track. This is the answer of our people." He felt the strength of General his black stallion between his thighs again. He heard the creaking wagon roll. Saw the great wheels turn. He heard the driver shouting to the oxen, the clap of the whip. He saw the horizon, the blue mountains again, pale with distance. New mountains. The smell of the fires and cooking meat was in his nostrils.

The girl ran into the room. "Pa," she said, "are you mad?"

"No, my child, I am sane. I have seen the light. My star in the sky."

She looked out of the window. It was broad daylight. Surely her father was mad.

"Begin to pack up," he said. "Load food, ammunition, blankets, karosses. Load everything. Cook-pots, water-barrels. Everything we need into the wagon and once again we will take to the road, to the veld where none can behold my face, where we will dwell alone with the wild beasts who fearing all men do not think that one is worse than another." He paused and

then said, "I am no longer the masked man, anathema. I am Ishmael the wanderer. I am Judas the traitor."

When Potgieter, Andries and Simon reached Schoemansdal they heard all the gossip. They heard about the masked stranger shooting Frikkie van Rensler.

"Before God, it takes a man to do a thing like that," Herman said.

"A man or devil, Meneer," was the answer. "And at the moment we are unaware which we are entertaining in our midst. But there is talk of him going."

"Such a man will be a loss," Herman Potgieter said. "I wish we had time to see him." And the matter ended there.

Simon had no idea that the man they were discussing was his old friend Schalk Fourie or that the girl he loved was here, less than a mile away.

There was more talk of Major Black the English officer who had disappeared. The rumours they had heard on the road were confirmed and they wondered what mischance had overtaken him in the interior. There were so many things. A charging elephant or buffalo. A lion, fever, snakebite, hostile bands of Kaffirs. You could take your choice. And they did. Each man knowing nothing offered the solutions that were his fancy.

Potgieter, who had liked the Englishman and helped to outfit him, for he had been in the dorp when he set out, said he would see if he could get news of him when he went to Mapela's country.

"Surely you are not going there?" his friends said. "Not at a time like this."

"A time like this. Why? Because of the talk of disturbance? Because someone says they have heard that the white python has been seen. Magtig, have you ever known true peace in the border? If we were to wait for it there would be no ivory

in traders' stores." He laughed, his great booming laugh that began in his barrel chest and ended in his belly. "Ja," he said, "we are going. Me and Andries my son, and young Simon here," he clapped him on the back, "and some others. Mapela has sent me word as far as Potchefstroom that there are many elephants in his land. A new herd that has moved in from the west, and my cattle that he is running are fat and should be counted. We leave to-morrow."

Simon had no difficulty in disposing of his merchandise. The community used twenty thousand pounds of lead a year, so there was always a market for the powder and bullets that were the lifeblood of the community. He took none of his servants and only one dog—Wägter. The others he left in charge of Potch, the boy he had bought from the slavers.

Before dawn broke, the wagons rolled through the silent streets, passing Schalk's house where Sybella slept exhausted by her work of organising everything they would need for the trek they were about to make. Not till two days later did her maid Kattie having met his boys, who had remained with his wagon in the village, find out that Simon had come and gone. So once again our paths have crossed, Sybella thought, and now we are moving apart. "How long would he be away?" she asked. Perhaps she could delay her father from starting. Perhaps . . .

"Three months or more his boys say."

She could not hold him that long. She wondered if her father's curse had fallen upon her too. But what had he done wrong? Surely God had sent these things to try him and that one day he would get his reward.

The sun still blazed from the cloudless sky. There were stories of cattle dying from drought in the less well watered areas of the south and east where men expecting rain had waited too long to trek them. There were many deaths among

the calves, for the cows, lacking sufficient water, were without milk, and the Schoemansdalers congratulated themselves on their more fortunate situation for their furrows ran strong and life was returning to normal. If someone as experienced with the Kaffirs as Herman Potgieter was prepared to risk his life among them they had all been unnecessarily anxious.

So several families who had been waiting to see which way the wind blew now decided to go south to trade and see the friends and relations with whom they had been out of touch for a long time. Willem Prinsloo with his wife and three children, Jan Breed and his wife and three children, Lourens Bronkhorst and Flip du Preez all decided to go together for company and protection. At the last minute the widow Maria van Breda and her daughter Mina and small son Jappie decided to join them. Since her husband had died she found conditions too hard here. They would all go together as far as Pretoria—two hundred and fifty miles away. Some would remain there while others went on still further.

It was a happy party of men, women and children that left the dorp on a journey that was, in effect, little more than a prolonged picnic. Travelling slowly, for there was no urgency, their wagons trekked south. At the Nyl River drift they laagered to enjoy the cool stream in which they could bathe and play while the men hunted game on the vlei.

That night they prayed and sang hymns and songs. The fires burned brightly. The African night covered them like a cloak. They would stay here two nights. It was a spot they all liked and the children were so happy paddling and swimming in the water. A night bird cried. The full moon shone down and was reflected like a golden ball in the river. It was almost as light as day.

In the morning the men went hunting. It was midday when the hunters came back with two reed buck and the cooking-fires were being started by the women when another wagon

rolled up and outspanned. The newcomers were William Robinson, a man in his early fifties, and his young wife Hester.

While they were drinking coffee with the trekkers a band of friendly Kaffirs dressed in skins and blankets joined them. They had feathers that they wanted to trade.

Hester Robinson who did not like the look of them said, "William, let's push on."

He said, "Why? The oxen are tired and so are we. Why not go on with the others in the morning?"

She said, "I have a feeling, a presentiment. I want to go on." And without waiting for a word from her husband she told the boys to inspan again now that the oxen were watered.

She was pregnant and her husband was prepared to give way to her whims. After all, she could sleep in the wagon as it wound its way over the rough road to the south. Besides, though he hesitated to acknowledge it, some of her presentiments had been right before. At any rate, there was no point in thwarting her. If she wanted to go they would go. They shook hands all around and left.

When they had gone a few miles Hester said, "Do you know something? Do you know why I felt uneasy?"

"No," John said.

She said, "Those were beautiful feathers they had, weren't they?" Everyone on the frontier was a judge of plumes.

"They were choice feathers," her husband said.

"They were too cheap, John. And there was a look in their eyes."

He remembered that too, now that she had pointed it out, and wondered if they might not have been safer if they had remained with the others. These were troubled times. The look in their eyes came back to him. Expressionless, hard as stones. The whites yellow, flecked with blood. And they had

not stood still. Their feet had moved like those of restless horses.

After the Robinsons had left, the Kaffirs said they would dance for the Boers. One of them produced a small drum and sat down with his back against a tree to play. By now the children were back from their games in the water, and the marsh birds had taken possession of the river again. All the children but Mina van Breda and her little brother were there. They had gone farther than the others to look for flowers—the wild mauve gladiola that grew in the long grass and the white perfumed lilies that favoured the black turf soil of the vleis. Hand in hand the big girl and the little boy had slipped into the bush before the Kaffirs came. They had not even seen the Robinsons' wagon leave.

Although the trekkers did not know it, Schalk and his party had crossed the drift a few hours before them. It was their wagon spoor they had seen in the drift.

"Shall we camp here, Pa?" Sybella had said, looking with longing at the lovely spot, the cool shade of the trees, the slowly running stream when they had come to it.

"No," Schalk said. "Others may come. This is a favourite outspan for any on the road."

So they had pushed on some miles and then turned off into the veld, going east toward the big vlei which was the mother of the river. Here by a great clump of impenetrable thorns they outspanned and settled for the night. There was good grass, water and shade, but it had not the romantic aspect of the drift. The hills were farther away, there was no grass tramped into a smooth lawn by the continued passage of men and the grazing of beasts. It was lonely, isolated and depressing. Sybella was depressed the more so as Schalk said they would stay here for two or three days. Since they were going nowhere,

time had ceased to be of interest to him. All he wanted was to be away from people on the veld where the silence of Africa would heal his wounds. But Sybella thought of her love and listened to the tales his boys had told Kattie of his adventures.

Fifty miles or so away other events were taking place. Herman Potgieter and his party were outspanned near Mapela's village. The king had sent gifts of an ox and some goats. To-morrow he would receive them, he said. Potgieter's cattle were assembled for counting and he had guides ready who would lead his party to the elephants that were in a valley some two days away.

The moon being full, Simon found he could not sleep and slipped away from the camp. In the distance he heard the sound of drums. They did not come from the royal kraal but from a thick clump of forest to the west. Drawn by curiosity he moved over the veld toward the sound. It grew louder and louder. At last forcing his way through some thorns he saw a clearing in front of him. A thousand people must have been assembled here. Men and young women stood and sat in a great circle. He knew he had stumbled on some secret ceremony. He knew that if he was caught he would be killed. It seemed safer to stay than to leave. Besides he was curious. This was what he had come to the north to see. This was the real Africa, where the past was still untouched by the present. There was a tree beside him which would be easy to climb. With infinite pains and without making a sound he reached its bushy fork and found a gap through which he could see what was going on.

Suddenly the chattering ceased. A silence fell on the entire crowd, a great stillness. The central area shone white as paper in the moonlight. Simon felt himself beginning to sweat. He was being bitten by insects. He realised it but felt nothing.

He was held frozen, immobile, caught like a snake in the cleft stick of the moment.

Then, after a pause that seemed endless, as if time were suspended, the Nyanga appeared, shuffling forward—an ancient withered man fantastically and horribly dressed in a regalia of jackal skins. The tails dangled about his legs, a jackal's head was fixed over his own, his back and chest were painted with white stripes, each alternate rib was outlined.

He began to speak in a low whine. Each time he stopped the crowd responded. The drums beat out a savage pulse-like rhythm. Simon could feel his own blood responding to it as if this music controlled the beating of his heart. Beer was brought to the crowd in great pots from which they drank. A small fire was lit. The witch doctor poured some powder into it and drank from a small vessel. When he did this the chanting stopped. The drums stopped in mid beat. Silence again fell. And absolute silence. A complete stillness in which everyone seemed to be listening for something. The men sat or stood with their necks outstretched, their heads cocked like dogs waiting for their master's call. Then the unbearable stillness was broken by the distant cry of a jackal.

Now the Nyanga became erect. The old man had disappeared. He became an animal, a jackal. He trotted up to his fire scattering the coals with his foot, then he padded round and round snuffling like a jackal. Suddenly he stopped and, laying back his head, raising the muzzle of his mask to the moon, he howled.

Simon felt the hairs of his back rise.

From the distance came the answering cry of a jackal.

Now the drums throbbed again, beating frenziedly, and the Nyanga began to dance. The dance was that of a mad jackal. He ran. He slunk about. He leaped. Sweat dripped from his body. Saliva from his slavering lips. And then, as suddenly as he had begun he fell, exhausted, to the ground. From all

around came the jackal cries. The deep note of the dog jackals, the shrill scream of the bitches.

Next a young man and girl, both splendid in their nakedness, sprang into the arena and began to dance. They danced the dance of the breeding jackals, of the bitch in heat and the rutting dog. They came together and mated and mated again, but now they were no longer a young man and girl. Before Simon's eyes they turned into mating jackals. This was no illusion. They were no longer people but animals. At last, satiated by their repeated couplings, the male came up to the body of the prone Nyanga, sniffed it and trotted off through the line of men that opened before him, followed by the female. All this in utter silence.

Now the crowd, apparently galvanised by what they had seen, broke up into an orgy of sexuality, growling and howling, they flung themselves upon each other, and Simon, exhausted by what he had seen, shocked beyond words, unbelieving yet believing, took advantage of the noise and confusion to slip from his tree and return to his bed—though not to sleep, for sleep was impossible, but to think. He had been party to a horror, to some kind of Kaffir magic. For men could not turn into animals before one's eyes. Could not—but they had.

When Herman Potgieter's oxen had been outspanned near the king's town a curious thing had happened. Half a dozen beasts that had been grazing nearby came up and joined his own. At first he paid no attention to them. Then something struck him. Why should they come to him? To those who live in the wilds all things have to be explained. The unusual is dangerous and worth investigating. He walked up to them slowly. Why? Why should native oxen join his own?

"Kom," he said, "kom."

They looked up at him and grouped themselves together ready to be inspanned. These were white men's cattle, used to

the yoke. They had pined for the wagons to which they were accustomed, for the smell of the white men who had trained them. He looked more carefully. They seemed familiar in some way and then he saw one that had been hidden by the others. A red beast flecked with tiny, almost invisible white spots. He was certain now. He knew these animals. Why, magtig, of course I do, he thought. That one in particular. They were the span he had picked for the Englishman who had gone hunting in the north. He would never have sold them so there was only one answer. They had been stolen and the British officer was dead. Potgieter had no love for the English, quite the contrary, but this fitted into the picture. Perhaps he should have paid more attention to what they had told him in the dorp. Then he laughed. After all, an Englishman was one thing and Herman Potgieter was another. He was Mapela's friend. He had supplied him with all the goods he wanted for years and shot elephants to give his people meat. Mapela was running his cattle. I must be getting old, he thought, to be alarmed at something like this. It was strangers who did not understand the Kaffirs who had trouble with them, not experienced men like himself who could talk to them in their own tongue. He said nothing of what he had seen to the others.

The next morning found Simon more silent than usual. He might have a touch of fever. Potgieter asked how he felt.

"I am well," Simon said.

"You don't look it."

"I am just tired," Simon said. Tired was no word for it. How could he explain what he had been through? The horror of what he had seen? Besides, Herman Potgieter would blame him for having gone. If he had been caught they might all have been massacred.

"I'll give you something," Herman said. "I have some good medicines." And he came back from his wagon with

a cup into which he put some drops from a green bottle. "Take this," he said, "and lie down."

Simon lay down on his bed in the wagon, fell into a deep drugged sleep, and never heard the king's messengers come to inform Potgieter that the chief would see him.

Everything was prepared for his reception by the Kaffirs. The induna who brought the message was of royal blood, wore leopard skin kilt and had leopard ear flaps to his gigantic head-dress of black ostrich plumes. He was accompanied by two warriors in full war dress with feathers in their hair, monkey-tail kilts and ruffs of white cows' tails hanging from their upper arms and below their knees. They carried great oxhide shields and spears.

"You will come unarmed," the induna said, "and leave your guns."

"And you?" Potgieter said, pointing to the spears.

"They are for your protection, O white lord, in case the young men cause trouble."

"Why should they?" Potgieter asked.

The induna shrugged his shoulders so that the black feather cape he wore danced on his back. "Young men are young men, lord. Their blood runs hot."

The white men left their guns leaning against the wheels of the wagons and accompanied the messengers to the great kraal. It was surrounded by a high stockade of tree trunks interlacing and bound together. Once through the gate and past the rows of huts that surrounded the perimeter they found themselves on a large clean-swept, circular space of hard tramped red earth. The arena was surrounded by armed Kaffirs in full panoply of war with spears, shields, feather head-dresses, capes, and leg and arm ornaments. At the far side Mapela sat on a kitchen chair covered with a tiger skin that served him for a throne. Behind him stood grouped his lesser chiefs, indunas and notables. His bodyguard of picked warriors

flanked them on either side. Behind him stood two naked maids waving great fans of ostrich plumes, one white and one black, to keep the flies that swarmed in the kraal from the royal countenance.

Behind the circle of people rose the domed beehive huts that were their homes.

Mapela half rose from his chair. "Welcome, O white man," he said, "welcome hunter, farmer, trader, warrior, strong man of your tribe, to the kraal of Mapela. Bring beer," he cried.

A line of lovely girls, naked but for their tiny aprons, before and behind, came carrying beer in great red pots upon their heads and drinking gourds in their hands.

"Drink, my friends," the king said. "Drink."

Other women and girls, less beautiful but still tall, slim, graceful as buck, passed among the warriors with beer.

"Aaic," the king said, "this is indeed an occasion that such men as you should see fit to visit such a man as I when the moon is full. Truly," he cried, "God has eaten."

A roar went up. "God has eaten!"

"Now drive in the cattle," Mapela said.

A big herd of beasts, cows, bulls heavy of horn, little bulls—replicas of their sires—young oxen that had been cut, heifers and gravid cows, and calves were driven forward by their herders.

"They are here for you to see, my friend, for you to see how well I have tended them, fattening them on the best grass, refreshing them with clearest water. Later we will count them one by one and measure your increase. But now the maidens will dance for you," Mapela said.

At his command the ranks of the warriors opened and two hundred or more young girls, shining with oil, polished as bronzes, lined up before the king and the white men in three lines. Almost naked they swayed to the drum music, chanting

in high thin voices, and clapping their soft pink lined hands in unison and, as they wove in and out, each stamped her feet in imitation of warriors dancing. They approached and went back, and approached again, so near that the white men by stretching out a hand could have touched their black satin skins. The scent of them was in their nostrils, sweet, female, feral almost, the scent of their sweat and the oil with which their skin was dressed. Potgieter knew what Mapela was doing. He was flinging temptation in their faces like a gauntlet. He was saying, "Here are our girls whom you scorn because they are black. But what have you to compare with them for comeliness?"

But Potgieter was wrong. Mapela was giving them a last look at women, at girls. A last glance at the final prize of man's existence. Concupiscence is no respecter of persons, lust a snake that bites the white man as well as the brown. While their eyes were on the young girls Mapela's bodyguard moved forward—moved closer. The white men did not see them. There was no change in the eyes of the girls who now were pressing almost upon them, tempting them body to body. Their eyes shone with the joy of the dance, by what they knew was about to happen. With emotions aroused by its sexuality, their bellies writhed, their lips were moist, their breasts up-tilted and then, as the warriors closed in and gripped each white man, they broke and ran through the ranks of the other warriors who were pressing forward.

Potgieter shouted, "What is this?" as he threw off the two who held him. More men flung themselves upon him, holding him pinioned. And still he was able to turn and face Mapela. "What is this?" he shouted again. "We come unarmed, in peace as friends . . ."

"Friends?" Mapela said. "What are friends? How can the white man and the black be friends? Between friends there is trust and love. There is a mating. But you have come

upon our land as masters. You scorn us and so you will all die." He extended his arms as if embracing the world. "To-day—for the moon is full again."

Screaming and twirling in a fantastic dance, Negende the Nyanga came through the lane that opened before him. "God has eaten," he screamed. "God's belly is full. The moon is full. The white men will be eaten up like driven rats before the dogs. Did I not doctor you? Has a shot been fired? And here is the strongest of the white horde that has eaten us up—as the locusts eat our fields—helpless in our hands." Froth and spittle ran from between his thin dry lips, his wrinkled face was contorted, shrunk into a mask of hate.

Mapela pointed to Potgieter. "Hold him," he said. "The others you may kill."

With a wild cry the warriors fell upon the white men. The kerries crashed through their skulls scattering their brains, assegais ripped through their clothes, through their flesh, till they stuck in the bone, and the warriors had to put their feet on the white men's bodies to withdraw them.

"We are not alone," Mapela shouted. "The moon is full. God is with you. The spirits of our fathers are with us."

The crowd chanted, "The moon is full. God has eaten. Mlimo's belly is full."

Mapela shouted, "As we act to-day so does Makapan our friend. His impis descend on the white man. Others of our young men are out at war, killing white men and women and children where they find them. Like packs of wild dogs we will sweep our land clean and the vultures and kites will feed upon their dead."

"Now clear a space." He waved his hand and the crowd fell back.

He pointed to Potgieter still struggling with his guards. "This man, the strongest and boldest of his people, the hunter of elephants I would kill slowly to see how long such a white

THE MASK

man takes to die. Strip his white hide from him slowly for I would have it to make loin cloths for my youngest wives."

Negende screamed, "Begin."

It had all been arranged under his direction and the waiting flayers bared their knives, bending over Potgieter lying prone, spread-eagled on his back.

"Now," Mapela said, "we will peel him, which will prove that under their skin the white man does not differ from the black. Aaic," he said. "Aaaic . . . we will peel him like a wand."

13. The Blue Wagon

SIMON, AWAKENED by the shouts from the kraal, dragged himself to his feet, peeped out through the closed tent of the wagon and realised at once that something was wrong. He took Herman's spyglass hanging from its leather loops above the bed, and poked it through a hole in the canvas.

Now the scene leaped into focus framed by the circle of the lens. He could see his companions being dragged away like bloody sacks, like broken dolls oozing scarlet sawdust. He saw a big man, he knew it must be Potgieter, break away from those who held him on the ground, leap to his feet, a single bloody figure, run a few steps and fall beneath the Kaffir spears. This was enough. Sick with fury, with horror, he picked up his gun and crept out of the wagon on the far side where he would be invisible from the kraal.

The servants they had brought were cowering under the wagon. He could do nothing for them. He must get news to the dorp. What everyone had feared and few had dared state openly had happened. The frontier was on fire. Lying flat he raised his head and looked about him. There, a couple of hundred yards away, the knee-haltered horses grazed completely unconcerned. He saw Windvoel in the middle of the group and whistled. The roan raised his head and cocked his ears. Simon whistled again and Windvoel came slowly toward him. What a good thing he had taught him this trick. It was old Schalk Fourie who had told him to do it. "It may come

in handy one day," he had said. This was the day. Still prone, he undid the riem that held the horse's head to its near foreleg with a knot below the knee. It came loose. Then he let Wagter go. As the dog sprang up he said, "Down, steady." Now he must show himself. He stood up, put his right hand with the gun in it over the horse's back, then seizing the long red mane in his left he vaulted on its back. He had no saddle, no bridle, only the riem fastened the head collar to guide his mount by neck reining. There were shouts from the kraal. Turning his head he saw some young warriors running toward him. He put his heels into his horse's belly but instead of turning away galloped toward them his dog running beside him. Then, swinging the roan before he came within range of the throwing spears, he fired at the nearest Kaffir, who flung up his hands and fell on his face, kicking his legs spasmodically. This was the best he could do. Now continuing the circle away from the Kaffirs running toward him and rapidly outdistancing them he made for the foothills. Once clear away he slowed down. He must save his horse, nor could he with the country up in arms gallop just anywhere over the veld for fear of running into a band of warriors bent on rapine and murder.

That night he watered his horse at a mountain spring and chewed some of the biltong he had in his pocket, then he sat with his dog beside him while the horse grazed around him with his gun on his knees and the riem in his hand. Two hours later he mounted again and rode on through the moonlight. How beautiful it was. A world of indigo, silver and black. Almost as bright as day, the brilliance of the stars killed by the light of the shining moon. He thought of what he had seen, of his friends, of Herman Potgieter his hero, of young Andries his companion, of all fifteen dead men. He thought of the horrible sight he had witnessed the previous night and wondered what would have happened if he had told Potgieter. Would it have been a warning? Would they have withdrawn fighting

a rear guard action around their wagons by day and laagering them at night? Had he failed his friend? Was he responsible for this disaster? Should he have ridden on and tried to kill a few more Kaffirs before they pulled him down?

He did not know where he was, but knew from the stars that he was riding east and south. If he kept on like this he was bound to cut the North Road somewhere. He would ride a few hundred yards at a walk, halt and listen, and then, hearing nothing, he would ride on. He kept Wagter at heel.

As dawn was breaking he found himself on the banks of a stream that he knew to be the Nyl. Perhaps he would meet someone at the drift. There was often someone camped near it. He rode forward carefully keeping himself screened by the patches of bush and trees, hesitating, listening, his gun ready. At last he broke out into the open and saw the drift. But why was there so much smoke? And what was the strange smell in his nostrils? If something was wrong it was no use waiting to be discovered. His only chance was to attack, to break through. He let out a wild yell, kicked his stallion into a gallop and charged. Not a soul was there, not at least a soul alive. All around him lay the devastation of a massacre, lay the dead, the tortured, the mutilated. Some vultures rose heavily after running in front of his horse's feet. The smoke came from the remains of the smouldering wagons. The smell was the smell of death from the bodies already turning putrid. Two small fair-haired babies had had their brains dashed out against the thorn trees that stood nearest to the road. This was war indeed. These people had been surprised and massacred. It did not look as if a single shot had been fired in defence.

Simon slipped down from his snorting horse, led him a little way to the water upstream where it was not fouled by death and watched him drink. Then he heard Wagter bark. There was a cry and he swung round, his gun ready. A half-naked white girl dragging a small boy by the hand staggered

toward him crying, "I'm Mina. Thank God you have come. Thank God," and fell fainting in front of him. Her kappie had fallen from her head. Her fair, almost white hair lay like water over his feet.

Leaving her lying on the veld, the small big-eyed boy squatting beside her crying and pulling at her dress, Simon went to the spruit and filled his hat with water which he poured over her face. Moving away from the girl and the child, Simon went back to the wreckage of the wagons. The iron tyres had been stripped from them to be made into spears. Iron to the Kaffirs was worth more than gold. The men's guns had gone of course. He found nothing of interest except one assegai whose haft had been shortened so that it could be concealed. Once again the devastation shocked him, though he had thought that by now he was beyond shock—after all that he had seen at Mapela's town. But he had seen that at a distance. Now he was standing with death at his feet, with torn and broken bodies, not only of men but of women, children and infants. The women half naked, some limbless, the thorn bushes strewn with the clothes that had been ripped from them. The vultures waited unafraid, perched, with their heads sunk into their white frilled shoulders on the nearby trees, for the man who had broken their feast to leave.

Simon was making a plan. Alone he would have struck north to Schoemansdal to bring news and assist in its defence. But with a girl and a child on his hands the picture changed. He would go south, perhaps they would meet a wagon. Then he could leave the girl and child, and ride on to raise the country. They would give him a saddle and bridle and a led horse. With two horses, changing from one to the other, he could do a hundred miles a day and in three days, allowing a little time for rest, he could be in Pretoria.

The last two days had been like a nightmare to Mina. Mina

and her baby brother had been several hundred yards away from the outspan when the attack took place. She had just said, "Come on, Jappie. There's a beauty," and was about to let him pick a bunch of flowers for himself when she heard the shouts and screams. She had quite a large bunch of white lilies and mauve gladiolas in her arms. She dropped them in the long grass and stood paralysed, clasping the boy to her legs. He began to cry. "Stop," she said, putting her hand over his mouth. Sensing the urgency in her voice he stopped crying and wept silent tears that ran down his grubby cheeks.

Slowly, moving like a hunter with the boy's hand in hers, Mina approached the drift. In a moment she grasped what had happened. Surprise. And massacre. The black, wild shapes of the savages were bent over the screaming women. She saw her mother speared. She saw worse than that. She saw the men lying grotesquely dead, and then as she prayed to God for help, for somewhere to hide, she found it. God had answered her prayers for there under a clump of bush was an old ant bear hole. Last year, or the year before some aardvark had cleared it out eating ants by the thousands and killing the queen. She went into it backwards as the wart hogs which often use these holes do, and dragged her brother after her. For the rest of that day and the following night they had lain there without food or water, petrified with fear. Even after the Kaffirs had gone she was afraid to come out. There might be some still lurking nearby or more might come. Besides, what would she see or find among the bodies of the dead? What sights of horror? She had seen the Kaffirs take fire from below the pots on which the women had been cooking with torches made of long grass cut by the sharp blades of their bloody spears, and light the wagons after they had looted them of guns, ammunition, blankets, axes and vessels of various kinds. She saw them drive off the working oxen. She saw the vultures come from

the heavens, dropping like stones upon the dead. In the terrible moonlit night that followed she saw the grisly forms of the hyenas and listened to their screaming laughter as they fought over the bodies. She heard the jackals barking in the distance as they smelled the carnage. And all the while her baby brother whimpered in her arms. Half fainting with fear, hunger and exhaustion the time passed. A lifetime in those few hours. Only when she heard Simon shout did she venture out, almost choked by the reek of the smoking wagons which drifted along the ground in the windless air.

And only now as she pulled herself to her feet did she look at her saviour, a young man whom she had never seen before, with a weatherbeaten hard stern face and fierce blue eyes. His clothes were ragged. His horse without a bridle or saddle seemed ready to founder.

"I am Mina," she said. "You will kill me if they come back. You will not leave me." She thought how much better it was to be a man and be able to die fighting.

Simon said, "We will get away from here."

He led the girl and child upstream to let them drink. He shaved some biltong from the stick he still had in his pocket and gave some to her and the child.

"Now you will mount my horse," he said, "and ride holding the child in front of you."

"He has no saddle or bridle," she said.

"I escaped," he said. "Herman Potgieter and his son and his people are dead—all killed by Mapela."

"Herman Potgieter," Mina said. She knew him well. Often she had sat on his knee as a child and listened to his stories. "Dead," she said. "How could he be killed? He was so strong."

Strong, Simon thought. Ja, sometimes it was not good to be strong. It took a strong man so much longer to die. He said nothing of this, only adding, "I saw him killed. I had no

time to saddle my horse but leaped on him as he stood in the veld. But I killed one Kaffir."

"You killed one?" the girl said.

"Ja, Mina, once mounted I swung round and rode near enough to kill one."

"You alone without a saddle or a bridle?" This was a man indeed. A prince like those in the fairy stories who came to the rescue of maidens in distress. He was a hero.

"Come mount," he said, and put out his hand for her foot. Once up he handed her the child who no longer wept or even whimpered. He was cried out. His infant world had collapsed about him.

Simon led the horse to a low ant heap, a little red concrete-like mound, and climbed on its back behind the girl.

"We ride south," he said, and kicked the horse into motion. With his left arm he held the girl around the waist to steady her. He felt her soft belly under his hand. Her hip was hard under his forearm. The smell of her hair, sweaty and acrid with smoke from the burning wagons, was in his nostrils. A light wind blew it against his face in a fine golden haze. In his right hand he carried his loaded gun.

"Keep off the road," he said, "but ride near it."

The girl pulled the riem that ran from the head collar and swung the horse into the veld. They went on at a walk. Twice they stopped and Simon went forward on foot to reconnoitre. Each time he had to find a mounting block, an ant heap, a fallen tree, or rock, to mount again. Then as evening approached, as the world became miraculously beautiful, bathed in mauve, lilac and rose, he found a thick clump of trees where they could sleep. They had drunk once at a spring and watered the horse. Again Simon grazed it on the riem in his hand. But Windvoel was showing fatigue and hunger. He needed several hours of grazing and rest. Each time they had dismounted Simon had allowed him to roll, which rested

and refreshed him, but no horse could go on forever, however bold his heart, however willing. When he had grazed for an hour Simon tied him to a tree for the night, well hidden in a thicket, not daring to knee-halter him.

They slept like puppies in a heap, like spoons fitting into each other for comfort against the cold. The child slept curled against his sister, Simon slept against the girl, her soft pliant and exhausted body fitting into his.

At dawn they found a stream—there was always water here—drank and pushed on following little game paths through the long grass that was diamonded with prisms of ice cold dew. The spiderwebs, strung from tree to tree and bush to bush, were like silver nets sparkling in the sunshine. In the trees the birds called. It was impossible to believe that this lovely land was not at peace. Impossible till he heard Wagter bark, a Kalfir shouted and a small band of them sprang up from the grass where they had been lying in ambush for just such an occasion. He called the dog in.

There was a slight rise ahead of them, a little ridge, which would give him a good field of fire. "The rankie," Simon shouted, urging the horse forward. In a moment he was down beside a rock. "Get down behind me with the horse and dog, Mina," he said.

She left him, leading Windvoel and the child. A moment later she was back. "I tied the horse," she said.

"Stay with him."

"No," she said. "No, I will stay with you. You know what you promised. If they are going to take us shoot me first. Before God you must kill me first." The big dog at her side was growling fiercely. The coarse hair on his back bristling. He waited orders to attack.

"Ja," Simon said. What did it matter who killed who? White men had done it before when they had to. It was nothing new for them to kill their women and children rather than let

them fall into such savage hands. Then he saw something that pleased him. The Kaffirs had guns. They were kneeling to fire. As long as they had guns they would not close in.

Two bullets passed over their heads.

"I know that one," Mina said. "The one with a white feather in his hair. He was the leader. I got a glimpse of him and those must be our guns. The guns they took."

"Thank God," Simon said. "As long as they have guns they will shoot rather than come close with their spears."

The man with the white feather was in easy range now and exposing himself. Simon rested his gun on a big flat stone and fired. The man threw up his hands and fell. Now if they have any sense, he thought as he rammed home his wad, they'll charge before I can reload. The Kaffirs did not charge but fired a volley which passed over their heads again.

The child was wailing now. Mina comforted him. "Fear not, little brother," she said. "Fear not, my boetie." Wagter stopped growling to lick the child's face.

Simon shot and reloaded again. Another man fell but there were too many of them. They were closer now.

One man had crept quite near to them through the long grass and would have speared Simon from behind if Wagter had not seen him. With one bound the dog leaped away from Mina, dragged the man down and tore out his throat. The end was near now. Another volley, a rush, and it would be over.

Schalk was thinking of the big bull giraffe he had shot yesterday. The skin had been dragged in by a pair of yoked oxen and would soon be cut into long twenty-foot driving whips. Then they would have to be braid, softened with wood ash and fat, twisted and wrung by means of a stone hung on to them at one end, the other being attached to a branch. Then he would trim the strips into shape. His mind was occupied with this, with the smoke from his pipe, with the view

of the distant hills, with anything except the past from which he was now so irrevocably cut off by the loss of his face and the death of Frikkie. He was no longer Schalk Fourie but the masked man and a murderer. But still, he thought, it was better that I should do it than another, for I am already ruined. Already apart from other men. This was only another spoke in the wheel of disaster, another strand in the skein of his unhappiness. He fetched his Bible from the wagon and turned to the Book of Job.

Jan, big enough now to use a gun, was out watching the cattle and horses graze. Nothing could have been more to his taste. This was life. Freedom in the most wild and silent places of Africa. Hunting, sleeping under the stars with no home now but the wagon. If he thought of the past at all, of the Colony and the farm, it was without regret.

Sybella was sewing, mending her father's and brother's clothes, under a naboom. Her mind was on Simon her love, and on her body that craved his love. Her young painter turned trader whom she had missed twice. Once on the road and a second time in the dorp when she had been nursing her father.

Her maid sat beside her also sewing but thinking of her young mistress and the foolishness of the white people who were so much less clever than the coloured. A man was a man and that was what Sybella needed. Well, why not be satisfied with second best? What was this strange idea that only one man would do? Of course one had preferences. She had preferences herself. To prefer was reasonable. One preferred perhaps bobotie to sassarties. Ja, preferred, but when one was hungry food was food. Mealie pap was also food, and water was drink however much one might crave coffee.

There was the sound of a shot.

Sybella said to her father, "Someone is hunting near us."

He stood up. The bushman and his coloured folk were

alert, their eyes bright, their heads turned to the sound, for this land was more or less empty of men. Few travellers would pause to hunt, and there were few travellers. A dozen wagons maybe in a week going both ways. Then there was a fusillade of shots.

"Hunting," Schalk said. "That is not hunting. There are too many guns. Get the horses." He took his horn from his belt and blew two sharp blasts. The picture—the pastoral scene of sewing women, of lazy men lying on the grass—was changed by the shots and call of the horn. Jan drove in the stock, the knee-haltered horses trotting lamely as their heads bobbed with the movement of their haltered forelegs. The oxen came in more quickly.

"The saddles," Schalk shouted. "The guns."

In five minutes they were all mounted, armed and galloping toward the sound of the firing which had intensified. There were single shots followed by volleys.

"They are coming," Mina said.

The Kassirs were much closer now, leaping high above the grass like dogs hunting. Simon shot again and hit a man. He went down screaming, which checked his companions, who again did not take advantage of the shot to rush the little hill. Simon reloaded.

Mina reached toward him and pulled the knife from his belt. "Now," she said, tearing open the neck of her dress. She pressed the staghorn handle into Simon's hand. "Now," she said, "kill me. Then kill my brother and escape."

In that instant she had given herself to him. The vague imaginings of the night, when she had pressed into his belly for warmth, that might turn into passion were gone. This was love indeed. She was giving him more than her body. She was giving him her life. It was the knife, not the man, which would go into her. It was her heart's blood, not that of her

maidenhead he would spill. How strange that it should end like this. That her life as a woman should end before it was begun.

First my mother and my friends, now me, and finally my brother, Mina thought.

"Kill us and go," she sobbed. "Kill me," she said. "Kill me, my love. You can still escape and avenge us. What purpose is there in your dying here?"

And then she heard something behind her. The galloping of horses. The thud of their unshod hoofs on the hard ground. The shouts of men. Five horsemen passed them and swung in an arc between them and the Kaffirs. The men opened out, riding a few paces behind each other. They were led by a man in a leather mask. Two coloured men and a bushman followed him, a boy brought up the rear. As they swept between them and the Kaffirs they fired. For an instant the Kaffirs stood and returned their fire. One man threw a spear. Then they broke and fled with the horsemen after them. There were more shouts, shots, cries of agony, and the little cavalcade turned back. Now Mina was in Simon's arms, her hand still gripping his hunting knife by the hilt.

Simon disengaged himself and went to meet them.

"You were just in time, Mencer," he said to the masked man.

"We heard the shots," Schalk said. "Follow us. Our wagon is not far away."

Simon had changed so much that Schalk did not know him. The pup he had given him had become a dog. The roan horse that he untied from a tree and led with them had changed too. Rough, thin, and exhausted, he was not the animal Simon had picked as part of the price of his pictures.

Simon lifted the girl and the child on to the horse's back and led him. They followed a game trail through a protecting veil of scrub and trees. There was the camp. Women, coloured and

native servants, a great giraffe skin spread out on the veld ready to be cut into reims or whips. The white tent of a wagon.

Still dazed by the fight and his rescue, Simon looked at it. A symbol of home, of life. He came nearer, and said, "A blue wagon. It is the wagon I painted." For now he recognised the remains of his flowers on the scratched panels of its sides. How in God's name had it got here? The old man had loved it.

He said, "That is Schalk Fourie's wagon. I know it. I painted it."

"You——" Schalk said. "You—you are Simon van der Berg?"

"I am he," Simon said. "This is your horse I lead and your dog is at my heels."

"By God," Schalk said, "this is good. To save a man is good. To save a friend is better."

Schalk's dogs were sniffing at him. Suster the old bitch recognised him and stood with her feet on his shoulders.

Sybella came toward him. Sybella. The girl who was his heart's desire, whom he had been going south to find and claim, was here and in his arms.

But Schalk. Why was he disguised, masked, as if the wilds of the Waterberg were some masquerade?

"Meneer," he said, "the mask?"

"Ja, my young friend, the mask. I have no face. It was bitten off by a wolf."

"Then it is you—you who——?"

"Ja, it is I who killed Frikkie when he lay dying on the kranz."

"Meneer," Simon said, "God has certainly afflicted you."

"God has also rewarded me," he said, "in permitting me to save your life."

Sybella was sobbing now. Kattie was laughing. Magtig, now her mistress would have the best. No second best for her. She had been right after all. Now they would remain together.

Her love, that strange love of which she had no understanding, would now be consummated in the way she understood, body to body, lip to lip.

"Food," Schalk said. "Food, coffee, brandy. These people have suffered."

"You do not yet know how much," Simon said. "It is war. The dead lie piled by their smoking wagons at the drift. Herman Potgieter and his people have been murdered by the Kaffirs. This I have seen with my own eyes so there must be more, others of whom I know nothing. I escaped, thanks to my horse coming when I whistled as you taught me, Meneer, so I owe my life to you twice over. This maid's mother is dead, and her friends. She is alone in the world to-day— orphaned and alone."

"Not alone," Sybella said. "For now she is one of us, one of our people, if she wishes to remain." She put her arm around the girl's waist. Thus they stood, the dark and the fair, with the little boy between them. "Come," she said to Mina, "come eat and I will give you clothes." They were much of a size, and both loved the young man who stood shifting his feet before them.

Simon was embarrassed. He knew suddenly that he loved them both. He thought of the night he had held Mina in his arms, of the way she had drawn his knife and pushed it into his hand. Giving him her life had made this change. Finding his love at last, he found his heart divided, torn between them as they climbed into the wagon.

Mina turned. "I must thank you for my life, Meneer." She looked into Simon's eyes. Then as she thought of her mother tears rolled down her dirty cheeks.

The child, seeing his sister cry, let out bellows of fear, rage and sorrow. What was all this? Why did he get no food, no rest? Two years old, he was already a small furious male thing demanding attention.

THE BLUE WAGON

Mina turned to Schalk and said, "You too, Meneer. We must thank you for our lives, you and your brave followers who turned the tide of our disaster. Simon was about to kill me when we heard your horses." She paused. There was drama in the air. Even the child was silent, dominated by his sister. "Meneer," she said, "it is in my heart, that the Nyl River where it crosses the road will have a new name now. It is in my heart that men will call it Moord Drift and that from this day all who cross that ford will think of our beloved dead."

"Moorddrift," Simon said. "That is a good name. A memorial to the massacred."

Schalk said, "Moorddrift . . ."

The girls and child had disappeared into the tent of the old blue wagon. The strings set out so long ago, so far away, were being woven by circumstance into a net.

Schalk put his hand on Simon's shoulder. "Jong," he said, "blood will flow. The dead cry out for vengeance. The Lord hath said an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, but here a hundred will surely die for one. A thousand for ten. Truly those that raise the wind shall perish in the whirlwind."

14. Commando

THIS WAS WAR. The word went on repeating itself in Schalk's mind. War. Already there were many innocent dead. None knew how many had died yet. How strange that he wanted war. That he had felt he needed it in some way to justify his existence, for it to come between him and the past, cutting him off from it with its red tide.

And now it was here. Perhaps one should not wish for things. Perhaps this was only an added burden to the guilt that he must carry, for although he had not caused it he had wanted it. And how strange to meet young Simon again under such circumstances, to save his life and that of a girl and child. The girl would complicate things for Sybella. Young men were young men and desire desire, and a man aflame for one woman might easily take another, for this was a fire at which the first who arrived might warm herself. He had spent a night with her on the veld, without doubt holding her in his arms, and more perhaps. Then he put these thoughts from him. This was for them, for these hot young children to settle, not for him. For him there was preparation. The first thing was to get the wagon out into the open where they could not be surprised. To-morrow they would move. But now the boy, the girl and the child must have rest. The oxen were inspanned and the wagon moved. Next the great bull giraffe skin was spread over the tent to deflect any assegais that might be flung at it. In

COMMANDO

a few hours the skin would be as hard as iron under the burning sun.

Sybella had given Mina one of her cotton dresses, a pink one, and a pink sunbonnet to go with it. With her fair hair combed and hanging down her back, her grey eyes dark rimmed with tiredness and sorrow, holding her little brother's hand, she presented an appealing figure to Simon who stood near the girls with his gun over his arm.

The horses and working oxen were grazing nearby. As evening fell they were rounded up and tied to the wagon, forming a living barrier against attack. Thorn bushes were cut and dragged under the wagon bed to fill in the spaces between the wheels, under the disselboom and the back. The coloured servants would sleep here with their guns ready. An attack would not come in the dark, but with the first dawn, at the hour that the Kaffirs called "the hour of the horns" when the cattle horns could be seen etched black against the first paling of the sky.

They lit no fires and ate biltong and drank water for their supper.

Simon said, "In the morning I must get on. I must ride with my news from farm to farm." He turned to Schalk. "You will lend me two horses and a saddle and bridle?"

"Take what you want," Schalk said, "as long as it is not General." It was his great joy that General had not died from horse sickness, but he had lost more than one horse of his troop. It was his idea that there was something in the night air that killed them when they grazed, so now he kept them tied, even muzzling them till the sun was up and the dew well off the grass.

Sybella said nothing. Simon would go but he would return. She thought of his drawings of her. Of her body as he had seen it bathing in the spruit at home. That is something he will not forget now that he has seen me again, she thought.

THE MASK

Mina, her eyes bigger than ever, one hand on Simon's thigh as he sat eating, said, "You will leave us? Magtig," she said. "You are all we have now."

"This is your home," Schalk said.

"Thank you, Menseer," Mina said, but her heart was not in her voice and her eyes were on the man who had saved her. The man who knew this other slim dark girl from the Colony. If only I was more beautiful, she thought, or she less beautiful, for the fair always envy the flashing dark, the dark the apparent purity of the fair. Olive skin desires to be white and rose, and the white and rose longs for the smooth skin of the darker complexioned when it is flushed with the apricot of youth.

Torn between his desire for them both, Simon thought only of escape into the lesser dangers of war before he was crushed between the nether and upper millstones of all these wild beauties. For these were wild girls, free thinking, accustomed to the matings of animals and their servants, freshened by the proximity of death into a still more urgent flowering. Their eyes were bright in the white light of the moon, their lips moist, their breasts high and quick moving as they breathed.

Soon all slept but the sentinels who watched. But all slept lightly, ready to awaken fully at the first sound.

Simon felt Mina creeping closer to him. The soft warmth of her body enveloped him; her hand found his and led it to her body. Simon's blood pounded in his veins. Tired as he was he felt strong as the girl's urgency was equalled by his own. He knew that had they been alone on the veld nothing would have stopped him, not the thought of Sybella since Sybella's presence within a few feet of him did not suffice to check desire—only its fruition. Love. What was love that its course should change so easily? What was a man? What was free will. What was desire? He looked out into the bright night beyond the wagon tent and thought of what he had seen only

three nights ago. The jackal dance. The Kaffirs mad with lust and blood. What had he really seen? How could men and women be changed into jackals? Yet how could he deny what his eyes had seen? His mind went back to what the Nyanga had said when he set out on his journey. Of danger, of death, of war, of women.

So with the coming of the dawn when Schalk and he climbed out of the wagon to reconnoitre the country, Simon felt nothing but relief. Before God it was good to feel a saddled horse under him again, and a gun in his hand while his eyes sought the surrounding bush for enemies. The great dogs—his own and Schalk's—ran out in front of them, their noses more reliable than the eyes of their masters. The horses were saddled and grazed, held by the reins. The boys all armed stood ready to mount beside them.

Schalk said, "Now we will light a fire and have coffee and cooked flesh for by day I fear nothing, since armed as we are we can beat off a great company of Kaffirs. Before God," he said, "I would even welcome an attack."

The two girls and some of the servants prepared the food. Seeing the girls bending over the fire, moving lightly as buck about their work, did nothing to calm Simon's spirit. In his mind he saw the golden fairness of his new friend that his hands had found in the darkness of the night, in his mind he saw Sybella as he had seen her bathing, as he had drawn her with his pencil. Evidently there were two kinds of manhood in a man. The one where he felt himself a man, upon his horse with a gun in his hand, and the other when he craved for the possession of a woman's body, the drive that drew him to her, that forced him upon her, drawn by her willingness as a nail is drawn by a magnet, and then held fast there, bosom to bosom, lip to lip, belly to belly, leg to leg, bound by the act as surely as any other mating beast.

Sybella's dark eyes flashed their promise at him. Mina's great

THE MASK

grey eyes seemed to say, "You know me. Your hands know the secrets of my body. I am yours for the asking or without." Both girls were ripe for love, as ripe as plums for the ground at the first touch of the finger.

This new wisdom that was being forced upon him, this man and woman knowledge which was now moving from the dreams of his boyhood into reality, frightened Simon and he occupied himself with his new horses, a blue roan stallion and a red mare—a full sister of his own horse. He saddled the roan. The saddle blanket would serve him to sleep in. He filled two small rawhide bags that would hang from the sides with the biltong and rusks that Sybella brought him. He filled a leather-bound gourd with water. He knotted the riem below the roan's neck on its head collar, and kept that of the led mare in his hand.

"Jong," Schalk was talking to him, "this will be long hard riding to which you are new. Ride each horse for one hour, then take off its saddle and let it roll and drink, if there is water, then ride the other. I have given you a horse and mare because they will not fight like two stallions. This is a wise arrangement and follows the wish of God that male and female should go in amity."

His hand was on Simon's shoulder.

"Thank you, Oupa," Simon said. "Thank you."

The girls came up. Sybella put her arms about him and kissed him, her pliant body bending into his, forcing him back against the shoulder of his horse. Mina kissed him no less ardently. Then she held up her little brother. "Kiss him, Jappie," she said, "kiss the man to whom we owe our lives and to whom our lives belong."

Simon swung himself into the saddle, waved, put his heels into the roan and galloped off waving his gun in the air. This was both adventure and escape, but he was depressed at what Mina had said. It seemed that saving a girl was not enough.

COMMANDO

By doing it you gained another possession. It was like finding a lost dog or buying a slave child like Potch. Even without willing it a man seemed to collect possessions. With his mind in a turmoil he rode south toward the home of Commandant General Marthinus Wessels Pretorius.

When the other wagons that they had left at the Nyl drift did not catch up with them at Middelfontein, William Robinson began to think that there had been some reason for his wife's fears after all. His anxiety for his friends was mixed with anger that he might be right again. These damn presentiments of hers annoyed him—especially when they were right. Being of a logical and scientific turn of mind he could find no explanation for them. Still it was impossible to sit there doing nothing so he told his story somewhat reluctantly to General Potgieter who lived here on his farm. The General called up a number of burghers who lived within easy distance and they rode off to see what had happened.

The scene at the drift had not changed since Simon had left it, save that the laagered wagons no longer smouldered and the bones of the dead were picked clean. But the little flags of torn garments still hung from the thorn trees. Turning about they rode back, hurriedly built a big coffin which they loaded on a wagon, and returned to the remains of the dead. Prinsloo, Breed, Bronkhorst, du Preez and then women and children were indistinguishable save for their skulls to which the hair and beards still clung. Some parts of the bodies were missing or had been destroyed. The Boers dug a grave beneath the thorns where they had camped and rode back, angry, watchful for ambush and eager for revenge. From Middelfontein riders and native runners went out in all directions with the news and call to arms.

Having made the journey without adventure Simon galloped

into the group of houses which formed the dorp shouting, "The Kaffirs are up! Herman Potgieter is dead with his people, and a trek has been massacred at the Nyl drift." Dropping with fatigue he was taken into a house, given coffee and meat, and questioned by the Commandant General.

Marthinus Wessels Pretorius said, "You say the Kaffirs are up? You saw this with your own eyes?"

"General, I saw it. I was there and only escaped thanks to God's mercy. Herman Potgieter, my friend, is dead, and the others with him. I saw them killed. I saw Herman skinned alive, his flayed body mocked and tormented by the Kaffirs as he ran among them screaming. He did not die till they drew his bowels from his body. This I saw, General. At the spruit when I escaped I found more dead—men, women and little children—all mutilated, torn to pieces as if by dogs." He put up his hand as if to wipe away the sights he had seen. "One girl and a child were left. I took them away."

"Where are they now?"

"They are with Schalk Fourie whose wagon I found in the bushveld."

"Who is this Schalk? I do not know the name."

"General, I should not have told you, for up here he is known as 'the man in the mask.' But I knew him in the Colony. His face was bitten off by a wolf,"

"So that is the masked man. I have heard of him. He is the one who shot the boy?"

"There was nothing else he could do and no other to do it, General, but it weighs upon his heart."

"Only a great man could do that, my son. We welcome such a man in the north. Now," he went on, "we must act."

He began to give orders. Messengers were sent in all directions. Boys on horseback, loyal Kaffirs and coloured servants. But already, before he had done talking, mounted and armed

COMMANDO

men were riding in. It had not taken long for Simon's shouted news to reach the nearby farms.

A day later men and boys were saddling up all over the north. Fathers with their sons and grandsons—burghers from sixteen to sixty and some even older and younger—were leaving their farms, their stock, their wives, children and mothers to the old men, the youngest boys and their servants to defend. Riders galloped from farm to farm across the empty vastness with the news, and in answer to the call the men came drifting in. Men in rough homespun garments, in leather clothes, their bare feet in veldschoen—home-made leather shoes. With blankets rolled and biltong and rusks, powder and shot tied on to their saddles.

The horses were as rough and hardy as the bearded men. They had never known a brush or a currycomb. Their manes were long, their tails swept the ground. They were small but tough, able to live on grass alone, to go two days without water, to carry an armed man seventy miles in a day. They were trained to hunting and war, all were used to gunfire. Many had been in action before.

The older men were calm, severe, angry at having to leave their work, furious at the atrocities. They were out to punish, to smite in the name of the Lord like the Israelites of old, for they were a chosen people and this was the land of Canaan. All either knew or knew of the murdered men. Several were related to them by blood and meant to exact an eye for an eye for the crimes they were about to punish. An eye for an eye. Oh no, ten eyes for an eye, a hundred. This time they would make an end to the killers, the cattle stealers, the rapers of wives and virgins, the slaughterers of children. Within them the blood boiled slowly for the Boers are a slow strong people.

The boys were eager for war. To ride on Commando was the dream of their lives. To ride out with the men was to be a man, and this was their ambition. Many boys whom we

would still regard as children had killed lions, and a few had killed men—marauders, stock thieves and the like.

Some groups, as they rode in like the spokes of a wheel to the assembling hub, were followed by wagons with their women. There were herds of driven cattle to supply food, the biltong was reserved for such times as they were in action or isolated from their commissariat.

The men, in large groups which grew ever larger as the converging tracks joined each other, rode silently. There was a menace in this silence of armed men holding their guns across their saddles or with their butts on their knees. Bearded men and beardless boys all moved in silence across the silent veld. Only the shuffle of the tripping horses' unshod hoofs broke the stillness of Africa, only the long dust of their passing marked the land. It lay behind them, a low, red, snakelike cloud, and then sank back as if exhausted to the dry, tired earth. The stiff grass broke beneath the horses' hoofs. Buck got up in front of them and stood for an instant before bounding away, but not a head was turned. No shot would be wasted on game. The silence must be unbroken. The surprise complete. For the men and horses, in their ragged clothes and covered in dust, were almost invisible as they rode over the veld with their scouts and flankers in front and beside them.

Their self-elected leaders were mostly old grey-bearded men, veterans of other encounters, men known for their wisdom in peace and skill in war. Old, scarred with wounds, lined by experience, burned almost black by fifty or more summers in the saddle, they rode ahead of their followers. The formations were loose, undisciplined, but in an instant, at a word, these men sagging in their saddles, riding loose-reined with their feet stuck out almost to their horses' shoulders, would change into a fighting unit of unparalleled performance, streaming out in a single line, wheeling, firing, retreating to load while covered by a second line of horsemen. Instinctive

COMMANDO

soldiers, hunters who lived by horse and gun, it is likely that nowhere in the world had they their match for this particular operation. For they not only had the knowledge of the country—there was not a place that one man or another did not know—but their anger, and their passionate love for the bare sun-dried land over which they rode made them into something more than a band of irregular light horse. To them every rock, every koppie, every drift, every stone, every tussock of grass was sacred. This was the land that they had wrested from the wilderness, for which many of their number had died, a land where their dead lay buried—both men and women, and little children. For them there was a mystic relationship between themselves and God and the soil of their land—*ons land*. The very horizons were theirs, the cloudless sky their private firmament. They were without responsibility except to themselves and God. Though riding to war they were at peace in their hearts and untroubled. Their hands were strong. A misleadingly drab, poorly mounted lot in appearance but dangerous and well equipped for their purpose. Brother bughers of an infant state. United in heart and mind, indivisible, a strange loose unit of mounted farmers, who not so many years later were to challenge the might of an empire and come to terms with it still undefeated in their rags.

15. The Road Back

WHEN THE messengers had left, the Commandant General turned to Simon. "Jong," he said, "can you take a message from me to Piet Potgieter at Middelfontein?"

"Ja, General," Simon said. "I can do it if you give me a fresh horse. I have ridden these hard."

"You shall have a horse—a good one—and we will take yours with our spare beasts. You will have them when we meet again." He sharpened a goose quill and began to write. Then he sanded the letter to dry the ink, folded it and gave it to Simon. "Tell the Commandant to collect every man who is fit for service and wait for us. For my Commando and the one that will soon be on its way from Rustenburg."

A coloured boy came in to say Simon's horse was ready. He said, "Good-bye, General."

General Pretorius said, "Good-bye and good luck. Ride fast and do not spare the horse. He can stay. He is of my own breeding."

Outside a bay stallion stood saddled and bridled, fidgeting as he waited. Simon checked his food, water and ammunition and climbed into the saddle. The group of men standing beside their mounts near the door waved and shouted, "Good luck and tot seins, Jong. We shall soon be with you." Simon knew that it would not be so soon because they would be held back by their wagons to fifteen miles a day whereas he could do fifty with ease, seventy or more if he had to.

THE ROAD BACK

The horse moved easily under him, glad to be going, shaking his head so that his black forelock swung, and cocking his pointed ears this way and that with interest. Simon pushed him into a faster tripple and then into a canter and a gallop to try his speed. He was very fast and quick off the mark. He swung him this way and that and then drew him up to a halt pulling him on to his haunches with a touch of the heavy bit. He was a splendid horse, well bred and well trained. Thus mounted and armed Simon was not afraid of anything except of an ambush or being caught in the dark.

He rode up the mountains that cupped the dorp, holding it in their embrace and out into the bush-covered veld beyond, alone but for the barking of a sentinel baboon on a high kran. Now he rode at a slow tripple to save his mount for any emergency that might arise. Crossing a spruit that was almost dry he found a pool and watered the horse and off-saddled to let him roll in the sand. Then he grazed him for half an hour and rode on.

In all his life he had never felt so tired and yet never been more alert. His mind functioned clearly as he looked over the surrounding country for possible danger, but another part of his mind was still occupied by what he had seen and done. The fight with the Kaffirs, the girls alone, and separately, little Jappie already so male and in his small savage way insisting on what he considered his rights of love and food. He thought of the back-veld Boers who till now he had considered rather slow and dull. The big, not overclean bearded men, the rather fat but powerful women, the boys who although younger than himself were already men, and wondered at the change in them. The determination, the dangerous quiet which he had mistaken for stupidity. These were men of a different kind to the sleek townfolk of Cape Town and his home. Before they had been like sheathed knives that a child could play with. Now the blades were bare, the steel sharp and pointed.

THE MASK

The soil changed to oaklip. The veld changed. There were more trees—rooibos, seringa and vaalbos. The country was close, enveloping him in a mantle of parched bush that would be safe as long as no Kaffirs were watching, but would allow them to ambush him with complete security if they were.

He decided to turn away from the road and follow any game or cattle paths that led north. When it grew dark he slept beside his horse that he tied to a tree for a couple of hours and then got up and grazed him in the moonlight. This seemed the safest thing to do. To-morrow he would push on harder, to-morrow he would cross the flats, warn the people taking the waters at the hot springs, if they had not already done so, to get into laager, and ride on to Potgieter.

He was not looking forward to telling the Commandant what he had seen for he was the nephew of his friend Herman. Magtig, he thought, the Kaffirs do not know what they have stirred up for themselves. These were not people to be killed like sheep, to be driven from the land that they had made their own. Not one but would die before he quitted his appointed place, or if driven from it would rest till he returned. A people who lived by their holy writ, by the law of God, but that of the Old Testament. The God of Israel, of revenge, of war. Every man armed like a hornet with the sting of his gun, all mounted on small strong horses, all determined to end this thing that they had not begun.

He was on the flats now, a sea of low scrub with patches of larger trees, of dry watercourses and pans, where the foliage showed green from the water that the thirsty roots drank up from some hidden underground source. He saw a pair of secretary birds stalking in their dignified fashion across the veld. They reminded him of home. He put up a giant pau, the great bustard that was common here. He saw springbok and hartebeest, duiker and steenbok. He saw jackals, for the veld at this time was deserted by man, and had gone back to the past

where the wild beasts moved uninterrupted by hunters black or white.

Over him in the still cloudless sky an occasional hawk sailed in great circles. Above them but invisible to the human eye he knew there were vultures. He knew they could see him, that if he fell wounded or lay dead they would soon be upon him, and that as soon as one came down, the others who watched in the upper air would follow, so that in an hour fifty or more would be assembled, some coming from as much as a hundred miles away, from Kranskop in the Waterberg where he had been told they nested in their hundreds, staining the cliff chalk-white with their droppings. With such thoughts as this, such memories, such speculations, he tried to put the immediate past behind him, to overlay horror with his knowledge of the veld and hopes of the future, when all this, which as yet had scarcely begun, would all be over. He thought of death, of danger, for the Kaffirs would fight as savagely as the Boers. He thought of how strange it was to have killed men, the first at Mapela's kraal, the others, he did not know how many, when he had been attacked with Mina. He thought of Mina, of the softness of her body, of the knife she had pressed into his hand, of the look in her big grey eyes when she had said "Kill me," of the knowledge in them of death and of rape, of the clarity of her decision, of the gift she had made him of herself—her heart, her body. He was profoundly moved by it, shaken by the responsibility she had thrust upon him. It was embarrassing to be a hero, to appear like a god to a young girl blossoming with womanhood.

It was on the morning of the third day that he ran into Potgieter's Commando outspanned by the road. Their waggons were laagered in a great circle. One wagon was drawn clear to form a gate to the enclosure which would hold the cattle and horses during the night. Simon had no difficulty in recognising the Commandant. Piet Potgieter was a very

big man who much resembled his dead uncle, except that he was a little less heavy, less darkly burned by the sun, and his beard and black hair were unstreaked with grey. But it would have been impossible to mistake him. He was mounted on a powerful black horse and rode from the other men toward Simon.

Simon said, "You are the Commandant?" He fished in his pocket. "I have a letter for you from the Commandant General," and gave it to him.

Potgieter read it sitting very upright in his saddle. "So we are to wait here," he said.

Simon said, "Ja. We are to wait till they come from Pretoria and Rustenburg. Every burgher in the north is on his way." In his mind he saw them coming—old men, young men in their prime, boys, each with a fire in his heart. Yesterday their friends had been killed, their women raped and tortured, their children slaughtered like sheep. To-morrow it might be their own turn. To-morrow their families might be dead, their farmhouses in flames, their cattle driven off. It was to prevent this to-morrow occurring that they rode to-day, determined to make an end of it, once and for all.

"My uncle?" Potgieter said. "You were there?"

"I was sick and escaped," Simon said. "I did not have time to saddle my horse but I shot one of them."

Potgieter said, "Ja. You shot one." So it is one less for me. Magtig," he said, "Herman was a strong man. It seems to have taken him a long time to die."

"Meneer," Simon said, and he could not go on. His words choked in his throat.

Piet Potgieter rode up to him and put his great hand upon his shoulder. The two stallions, the bay and the black, laid back their ears and snapped at each other, squealing and plunging.

"His death will be avenged," Potgieter said. "Before God

THE ROAD BACK

this is something for which many will die. To be speared in war, to be shot, that is a man's death. But to be skinned alive like a rabbit!" He spat over his horse's shoulder and swung him up on his hind legs as he turned back to the others who were waiting to hear the news.

"We stand fast here till they come," he shouted. "Our brothers from Pretoria and the Rustenburg are on their way. Then we move together against the Kaffirs."

The men who had been sitting alert in their saddles relaxed. There were about a hundred of them, and a scattering of women and children who had come with their men, who were afraid to leave them on their isolated outlying farms.

Simon saw the old blue wagon with its peeling paint, the great spotted giraffe hide spread over its tent. "So the masked man is here?" he said.

"Ja, he is here with two girls and a child, his daughter and those you rescued at Moorddrift."

So Mina's name for the place had stuck. Now and forever, long after they were all dead, the name would cling, a verbal monument to the massacred dead.

Simon rode between the wagons of the entrance and saw Schalk sitting on a box cleaning his gun. His dogs and the bushman were with him. His own dog Wagter that was tied to a wagon wheel hung itself against its chain and broke it to get up to him. The bay horse who did not know the dog reared and slashed at it with chopping hoofs. Simon slipped from its back, passing the reins to one of Schalk's boys.

He said, "Water him and give him a feed of mealies. He has come far and fast and belongs to the Commandant General."

The boy said, "Ja, baas," and led the bay away to off-saddle, feed and water him before letting him run with other horses that were not in use.

The girls who had been resting in the wagon now climbed out and took him by the arm, one on either side.

"So you are back," they said.

"Ja," he said.

"You must be tired," Sybella said.

"Tired," Simon said. "I am like one dead."

Mina brought him a basin and water and they both stood by him while he stripped to the waist and washed. Mina ran to bring him food and he sat beside old Schalk to eat, with his dog's head on his shoulder.

Schalk said, "That dog of yours was more trouble than the girl."

Simon laughed. "We are used to each other," he said. "He is a good dog. He killed one of the Kaffirs who was creeping round our flank. He saved us."

"All my dogs are good," Schalk said. "But it is a good man who has a good dog, for dogs come to resemble their masters."

While Simon slept exhausted on the kartel of the wagon, the two girls arm in arm strolled out of the laager accompanied by Schalk's great rough-haired hounds. They walked like sisters with entwined arms but they were filled with love and hate.

Mina was filled with gratitude and jealousy. Sybella overcome by sympathy for the girl whose mother, her only living relative apart from the child, had been abused and killed before her eyes, was also consumed by envy of this girl who had slept in her lover's arms. Had he taken her? If it had been I, she thought, he would have. Ja, she thought, if only I had had a chance like that. That was what Kattie had said too. A young man with a maid in his arms alone on the veld, what else could they do? What else would be natural? What else indeed, Sybella thought, and turned to look at the fair grey-eyed girl who walked beside her.

Simon woke tormented by the perfume of the girls in whose bed he slept alone. There was the smell of their sweat on the

blankets, the faint odour of the herbs in which they stored their clothes. There were long hairs symbolically entwined—black and gold upon his pillow. Thoughts of their bodies filled his mind. Now that he had eaten and slept, his blood would not keep still but rose in a flowing tide to torment him. Finding no rest or answer to his questions he got up and went out.

The fires for the evening meal were sending up little spirals of blue smoke. There was the smell of roasting meat and coffee in the air. The atmosphere was one of peace and waiting. The mounted guards were driving in the horses and cattle, and Piet Potgieter was setting the guards for the night.

Less than a mile away in a wood-clothed koppie, a company of Kaffirs was watching the camp, ready to profit from any mistake the Boers made. Ready to cut off any hunter who strayed too far from the others, and waiting for the night to fall, and the dawn of opportunity to come.

When it was dark they moved out, slipping over the veld, dark from the scattered trees—ghostly shadows that moved as silently as jackals into position around the camp. They surrounded it completely, except upwind so that their scent would not come to the Boer dogs that slept with one eye open, as alert as wild animals for their masters' danger. These dogs knew the smell of the wild Kafir who greased themselves and dressed in skins and feathers. For this they had been trained. In the laager the men slept but lightly too for there was no certainty of safety in their hearts. Every two hours the sentries were changed. Beside each sleeping man was his loaded gun.

Though it was summer the night was cold so that the sleeping men pulled their blankets closer. It was the hour before dawn. There was as yet no sign of light, no paling of the eastern horizon. Only the cold that precedes the greyness of

the coming day. The shivering sentries peered into the blackness of the veld. They well knew that if you look hard enough you will see trees move, and bushes become crouching men, but still they stared. The older and more experienced felt some sense of danger as every hunter must, some pressure, as if they were watched by the hidden eyes of some wild beast.

Makapan's four hundred Kaffirs, one of his strongest companies of trained war-hardened warriors, crept closer through the grass that dripped with icy dew, trying to control the chattering of their teeth and prevent their assegais from clattering against each other. At last, unable to advance further with safety, they lay waiting like black panthers ready to spring. Inside the cage of their ribs their hearts pounded. They whispered "*sah sah*" to themselves, the curious noise the Kaffirs made as they stabbed, driving their blades home into flesh and bone. In the dark they felt their eyes suffuse with blood, as they strained against the leash of time that held them. At last it would come. The moment when as one man they would rise and charge screaming at the wagons. The signal was a blast from a whistle that their leader had obtained from a trader. He wore it on a leather thong about his neck. Slowly, slowly, invisibly the sun was climbing below the horizon to renew the daylight. The sun, the master of his wife the moon which paled before his onslaught. Slowly the dark blue blur of the night turned to black, the black to grey, the grey to pearl and then it came.

The blast of a whistle.

Rising out of the ground the four hundred Kaffirs charged. The sentries fired and fell back to the wagons. Every man leaped from the ground gun in hand and ran to his position as the Kaffirs flung themselves at the wagons. Their throwing spears pierced the tents. They leaped at the wagons like wild dogs disembowelling a buck and were driven back. Now the Kaffirs opened fire. A number of them had guns. The bullets

went wide but the spearmen hesitated. Why close when they could shoot the Boers from safety, lying in the long grass?

Small parties of the bravest charged again, unwilling to wait. But already the element of surprise had been lost and with it some edge of their enthusiasm.

Simon fired at a dark shape and saw it fall. His gun was snatched from him by Mina and a loaded weapon put into his hand. He fired again and three men fell. The girl was loading with buckshot. Again the exchange took place. Mina was getting her revenge. He could feel her at his shoulder. Once she fired herself at a Kaffir who was so close that there was no time to hand the gun to Simon.

The sky was paling to pink.

The Kaffirs fell back to regroup and charge once more. Simon saw them clearly now. The dead and wounded lay scattered round the laager. The rest standing out of range were waving their assegais and shouting derisively. It would not take them long to eat up this handful of white men. They were in full war-dress, their heads decorated with ostrich plumes. The black cloaks of plumes that covered their shoulders moved up and down as they ran. They had spears and shields and knob kerries. The long hairs from cattle and wildebeest tails were gathered in circles below their knees and above their elbows. A small wizened man, evidently a witch doctor, pranced in front of them running up and down their lines screaming exhortations. Their leader, a big man, his body painted with red ochre striped with white, stood leaning on his spear waiting for his men to recover their breath.

The Kaffirs stood unperturbed for they were beyond gunshot. The big red and white, and black and white oxhide shields they carried were visible down to the smallest marks. A few were bleeding from flesh wounds. Some, more seriously hit, who had managed to get back to their fellows, lay gasping on the veld. Those with guns continued to shoot.

In the laager Simon could hear Piet Potgieter calling to the grooms to saddle up. He could hear them talking to the horses, the stallions still strange to each other were fighting and screaming in the hands of the horse holders. Thirty men, almost half their strength, were mounting.

The tents of the wagon stank with the smell of sweat and powder. Assegais that had come through the canvas were embedded in their floor boards. But thanks to the great giraffe skin that covered the blue wagon no spears had penetrated it.

Schalk, profiting by the lull, was doing something in a corner. Simon saw that he was loading a long gun that he had not seen him use before. Then, apparently satisfied at last, he poked it through a gap in the tent. He seemed to be taking a long time, but suddenly he fired. The noise was not as loud as that of the elephant guns they had been using at close range. Simon looked at the Kaffirs. Schalk had hit the witch doctor who lay twitching in front of the men he had been encouraging to attack. Schalk leaned the gun against the bed and said, "That is a good gun for long shots. An English rifled gun. But slow to load and requiring special bullets."

Still surprised, Simon looked back at the Kaffirs who were about to come on again, when the Boer horsemen swept between them and the wagons firing from the saddle and, completing the circle, galloped back into the laager, handed over their horses to the waiting grooms, and ran to take their places in the defence again. More servants rolled the wagon that made the gate back into place, and pushed thorn bushes between their wheels.

The Kaffirs hesitated and then came on once more in a savage wave of tossing plumes. Some gained the wagons and almost swept over them, leaping up at them as if they were rocks, only to be met by the native servants with spears and clubs. The Boers poured volley after volley of buckshot into them.

THE ROAD BACK

Mina, still loading for Simon, shouted, " Kill 'them! Kill them! "

Now there was a wall of dead and dying piled against the wheels. Once again the Kaffirs fell back, this time in disorder. Some tried to reform but their captains were dead and most continued to flee.

" Mount! Mount! " Potgieter shouted. Every Boer sprang to horse and swept down upon them. This time it was a rout, and only a handful found safety in the hills where horsemen could not follow them.

16. The Kaffirs Assemble

IN THE mountains the Kaffirs were jubilant. Mapela had wiped out the party at the drift. There had been loot—working oxen, guns, ammunition, blankets, stores and the iron tyres stripped from the wheels. Herman Potgieter, one of the great Boer leaders, was dead, his head stuck on the point of a stake by the royal kraal, fifteen of his party—all hunters and fighting men—were dead and Mapela's biggest fighting force under his half-brother was advancing on the Boers who were collecting their forces to strike. His orders were to destroy them before they assembled in strength. Piecemeal destruction should not be difficult. Makapan had killed the two Prinsloos, father and son, by the simple device of going up to their farm to ask for medicine for one of their number who they pretended had been hurt by a lion and then spearing the Boers as they brought bandages. God had eaten well.

The young men's spears dripped blood. The kraals were full of stolen cattle and beer flowed, poured out of the great red Kaffir pots into gourds and tortoise shells by smiling maids. A feeling of invincibility, that the day had at last dawned in which the white man would be driven from the land in which they dwelt flooded over them. Schoemansdal could wait. The news from there was that it had been put in a state of defence but that no action was being taken beyond the guarding of the grazing cattle, the blocking of the streets with wagons and bush. There was a general state of prepared-

ness among its inhabitants, infuriated by the loss of their friends and relations, which would make immediate surprise impossible. But peace, precarious still, reigned among the hills and in the Kaffir kraals. There was some coming and going of messengers but apart from this all was quiet. There were no shots from white hunters to disturb the stillness of the day, the sky remained cloudless, the birds sang in the trees, the hawks and vultures swung in great loops in the hot air currents that rose up from the valleys.

But Negende the Nyanga was not easy in his mind. He sat watching two scarlet breasted shrikes in a thorn bush working on their untidy nest of grass and twigs. Blood, he thought. Aaic, there has been much blood spilled but it had not all been white. There had been complaints. His medicine had not been effective. Of course the first man killed by the young fool who had escaped the massacre at the kraal was easily explained. When the medicine had been sprinkled over the warriors, the terrible human soup, that would ward off the white men's bullets, none had fallen upon his person. Nothing was simpler than that. It was easy to believe that here and there a man had not been touched. But now he had more news which had not yet reached the King. His brother's army—that was to have cut the Boers to pieces before they gained in strength, before, like an avalanche of stones rolling down a hillside, they assumed proportions that were irresistible—had been destroyed. When Makapan learned this, and it would be soon, they would call upon him for further explanations. Aaic, the way of a doctor was hard.

The bush in which the birds were nesting was dense with tiny olive-green leaves. The thorns set in pairs were immense, white as bones against the greyish foliage. The birds called together so that it was impossible to tell which was which. The liquid notes of both male and female joined in a fluting sound. The scarlet breasts, the black and white barred

wings came and went against a sky that was almost ultramarine in its blue intensity. Colours meant nothing to Negende, nor beauty, but the continuity of life struck him. The irrelevance of the birds daring to continue their personal affairs when his had gone awry. In a fury he reached for the nest they had built of grass, twigs and hairs and tore it to pieces while the two birds shrilled their anger.

If, and this *if* came to him hardly, the warriors had failed there was only one thing to do. He would have to show the king the sacred caves in the mountains which only he and his fraternity ever visited. Vast caverns in the limestone where strange things lay—the bones of men and beasts among ancient smoke-blackened hearths under wall drawings done before men, as he knew men, had come into these parts from the north, for to him only his own tribe were people. Then there was the snake, the white python. It must go with them. Food must be taken, and water. The caves must be stocked for a siege. Just in case again. He could not face the future, the possibility of failure, for the plan to drive out the Boers had been his, nurtured from the small seed of its inception and fostered into the tree of action by him alone. He had said, “Let us invite Potgieter and his friends to a hunt and kill them. Let us watch and kill any out upon the roads by subterfuge. Let us kill the outlying farmers, and then as the Boers collect in small parties for their revenge let us catch them a few at a time and destroy them.” Aaie, all this had been agreed to, but they had failed in one vital thing. He had said, “Let us do our work with a spear, the weapon of our race—the assegai and the kerrie, the wicked club carved into a knob from a tree, or the horn of a rhinoceros. Do not let us use guns.” But some had used guns, waiting till it was light enough to see to use them, forgetting that Boers had many more guns and could use them better. This was where they had

THE KAFFIRS ASSEMBLE

failed and where he, ancient in wisdom, was wiser than the indunas, the captains, the chiefs and princes who, enthralled by the new, had abandoned the old in their bemusement. If they had fought before dawn with spears alone or if they had kept the Boers awake night after night with feints and mock attacks, if they had stolen the horses, killed the oxen, things would have been different. If when dismounted and exhausted from lack of sleep they had pressed home their night attacks upon the Boer, failure would have been impossible.

While these thoughts went through his ancient head he shredded the shrikes' nest between his fingers, tearing it to pieces as if it had been the throat of an enemy, reducing it to its integral parts, to twigs, to grass, to hairs, each so painstakingly laid, twisted and woven by the birds who had collected them. There were no trees here. All had been cut for fuel by the people in the kraal. Thorny scrub alone remained and tussocks of harsh grass inedible even to the goats, but Negende as he squatted merged into the bush, less conspicuous than the scarlet-breasted shrikes. He merged into this background as neatly as a snake, as the puff adder that lay exposed to the heat of the sun a few yards away. He was as motionless as the snake, as dangerous, this ancient man with his mixture of evil wisdom and practical knowledge, this curious combination of senility and savage virility, for now he was thinking of women. Of the girl he would exact from her father as a reward for not smelling him out and having him killed when next the king called for such a ceremony. A young girl of fifteen, smooth skinned with eyes like the wet brown stones that shone on the veld after rain. There were great rewards in his calling, great wealth in cattle and women, in ivory that could be traded, in goats and fowl. And surely these were greater than friends. For what after all were friends? Only one thing mattered. Power. The power of the snake, of the white python he had found when it was quite small and had nurtured on mice,

rats, rock rabbits and hares. Now it could eat a small dog. His hands longed for the smooth texture of its skin, for the weight of its curling body about him as they longed for the body of Mkabi who was his latest heart's desire, the girl who would warm the embers of his lust, kindling it into new fires.

Then he heard shouts from the kraal and the loud shrill crying of the women, the ululation of their intolerable lament for the dead, that pierced the silence like a spear, wounding the day with its horror. They know, he thought. The news has come. These are the mothers, the wives, the sisters and the lovers of the dead. Lower, heavier, as is the sound of drums against flutes, came the roaring muttered anger of the men, the few warriors left in the kraal, and of the others—the men too old for war and too young for it. The two sounds joined in a harmony of sadness and anger. Truly, he thought, someone has trodden on the adder, someone has disturbed the antheap of complacency with the stick of news.

He stood up, his withered form unwinding itself from the ground with a rattling of the bones, shells, skulls and dry skins that were his garments. First he must get to his hut which stood apart from the others, put on his full panoply of office, gather his followers and then descend upon the people bewildered by defeat with new inspiration, new counsel, prepared for every eventuality, even for death. His own or another's. Death was the answer to all things and up to the present he had been its master. If the wrath of the people could be turned from him, for he knew they would blame him, to the torture of another, he would be safe. Also he must get the snake. With the white python draped about his neck and loins no man would dare to touch or blame him.

Behind Negende's hut in a little thicket there was a deep pit. In its centre was planted a dead stump and over its branches, its body gracefully entwined, the white snake rested

in the afternoon sunshine. Below it three rats sat cleaning their long whiskers with their paws while they waited to be eaten. Negende dropped a platted riem over the edge of the pit and climbed down, picked up the snake, wound it about his neck and climbed out again. Now he was ready to face the chief and people.

His assistants, now also dressed in their full panoply of horror, were waiting for him. Together, with Negende leading, they approached the royal kraal in a kind of shuffling dance. Two of his men blew shrill blasts on cow horn trumpets. Two others beat small drums. A path opened up for them as the crowd fell back before their authority.

Makapan was sitting in his royal chair. The usual tiger skin was thrown over it. The chief was dressed in his kilt of tigers' tails. In his hair he wore two long nodding feathers from the tail of a widow bird.

"Welcome, false prophet," he said. "Welcome, false counsellor. Welcome, snake who comes draped in snakes."

"What is this, oh Makapan, oh elephant, lord of the mountains, the trees, the living waters? Oh buffalo, lion, father of ten thousand, what are these words I hear, or do my ears deceive me? Am I so old in years and wisdom, so separated in time from my people that I hear men, even kings, talk with the tongues of little children?"

"Our impis are defeated," the king said. "Our men are bleeding or dead from the guns of the white men and you say 'What now?'"

"Listen," Negende said. "It is not I but you who say what now when the Boer hosts approach. Approach, oh king." He pointed to the sun now falling in the sky. "But the night also approaches, yet to-morrow the sun will shine again. What now, you say, oh king? This say I, the old one, the wise one, adviser of kings, witness of both their deaths and births, of one after the other, so that the days of their lives are like hours to

me, like veld fires that burn furiously in wind of their passions and then die out and are scattered like ashes, and forgotten. Aaie, king," he said, "the kings are forgotten. But Negende the lord of the white snake lives on. Had the war been fought according to my commands the Boers would all be dead. But since it was not, since your captains fought the white men with guns instead of with spears, this is my counsel."

"Speak," Makapan said.

"All is not lost," Negende said. "Now we must go to the cattle kraals and dig up the grain stored in pits beneath their dung and carry it to the great caves in the mountains. Aaie," he said, "carry grain and water and wait to be besieged. For there no white man will enter."

"Nor will we enter," the king said. "For the place is *tagati*, bewitched. There are bones there that we have heard of—the bones of men who were not men but half-men who lived in the caves like beasts when the world was young."

"That is true, oh king, but I, Negende, have already dealt with the spirits who there abide and have tamed them. So now none have cause to fear for I am greater than the spirits. The snake too is greater." He put his hand on the snake's head, holding it out. "Where the snake goes there is no reason for fear. Already I have prepared a place for the snake that is our guardian spirit. Come," he said, "let the men dig in the kraals since no woman may go among the cattle lest she defile them with her blood. Let the maidens and women carry the grain and water. Let there be haste and strength but no fear. Now, oh king, oh people, I, Negende the doctor, have spoken. These are my words." He sat down.

The king rose and spoke. "Let it be done as Negende says. Let the young men dig and the women carry." He looked down at Negende and said, "The cattle? What of them? They cannot go into the caves."

"That too has been considered, oh lord. Let a party of

THE KAFFIRS ASSEMBLE

young men and boys drive them into the valleys of the high mountains where they can live secretly till this is over. Till the night has passed, the day in which no white man lives, has dawned."

With that he got up again. The horns blew, the drums played and the doctors left the assembly as they had entered it, dancing away with dragging shuffling feet.

Once they had gone a sigh of relief went up from the people. There had been no demand for further sacrifice. Nor was there any reason for it since Negende had enough white bodies to cook and make into medicine. But all the same each man in his heart had had some fear, each woman, each child, for sometimes children were killed when the god was hungry or special medicine was required.

The chiefs and headmen now organised their parties and soon strings of women moved like ants in single file over the little paths across the veld that led into the mountains where the sacred caves were situated, at the foot of a great yellow cliff, while the men dug, under the six feet of dry powdered manure that raised the great cattle kraal above the ground, and opened up the grain pits which the dung both preserved and concealed.

In two days it was done. First the food and water. Then the people with their cooking pots and mats and blankets, all carried by the women. The men with their spears, kerries, shields and guns formed a guard about them. Defences were run up. Scouts posted to bring news of the Boers. And a new form of waiting in the gloom of the caverns was begun.

The Boers from Rustenburg and those from Pretoria now met Potgieter's men and formed a single company. Moving loosely over the veld with advance guards, flankers and rear-guards picked from among the men who knew this country like the bodies of their wives, the supply wagons and driven oxen

under a strong guard, they moved after consultation on Makapan, deciding to deal first with him.

Mapela the murderer who had flayed Herman Potgieter alive could wait. Ja, before God, let these Kaffirs drink the wrath of the Almighty, let their fields be watered with tears of their women, let the aasvoels, the hyenas and the jackals eat their fill of black flesh for a change. Stern, implacable in their quiet rage, these farmers moved across the veld to the north.

Their horses' unshod hoofs churned up the drift of the Nyl as the men rode over it, hatless out of respect for the dead who lay buried there beneath the thorns. Eyes for eyes, teeth for teeth, blood for blood was in their hearts. This was not a matter of leaving revenge to the Lord their God, for they were His chosen people, the very instruments of God who implemented his will. The Commando was God's weapon, the sword of Gabriel about to sweep these assassins out of their hilly gardens. No doubt entered their hearts. Some might be killed, some would be, but victory was already theirs. Their prayers already answered. Already the Kaffirs waiting for them were dead in their minds. These last acts of theirs, attacks, retreats, the making of defences, were no more than the movements of phantoms. For had not the Lord said, "Neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh and fear was not." So with their hearts high they rode over the veld eating up the miles that separated them from Makapan.

Simon van der Berg was with the group which made the first contact with the enemy by almost riding into a clever ambush, for the Kaffirs, instead of choosing a narrow neck or valley in which to attack, that would have been carefully reconnoitred, had concealed themselves on a wide front in the long grass and bushes. As the Boers rode through them they let them pass and then sprang up behind them. Two men were killed and one wounded. Simon had an assegai

pass through his shirt grazing his skin, and the bay stallion which General Pretorius had allowed him to keep for the campaign was slightly wounded in the near quarter, and began to bolt. But Simon soon pulled him up with his heavy bit and swung him around to join in the charge the Boers made at the Kaffirs who, having fired their guns and flung their spears, now fled into the surrounding thickets of scrub where they could not be pursued.

Two days later they came upon what was left of Makapan's force drawn up in battle array. All wore their plumed head-dresses and capes, the captain and chiefs had tiger skin ear-pieces and tails, or strips of tiger-hide kilts, that swayed as they jumped forward to the attack. The Boers withdrew without firing a shot, to lead them into more open ground, and then wheeling swept them with their fire. The survivors bolted, making for the mountains, and the Boers rode into the village to find it deserted. No one was left. Women, children and old men all were gone—even the dogs and chickens had disappeared. But in the search they found garments belonging to the murdered women and portions of bodies that had been roasted on a spit. There was the unrecognisable, terribly mutilated body of a tall man. All his fingers were cut off. His hands and his trunk had been thrown into a great jar of water. Hands that had been roasted on spits were also found. This was even worse than the Boers had expected, and mad with rage and horror they fired the town. The dry thatch caught quickly and the fierce flames reduced the mud huts to heaps of smouldering ash. Armed parties soon found the hidden cattle, following the spoor into a mountain valley, and driving this booty before them they returned in triumph.

Schalk, who had hunted near here, said he knew where the Kaffirs were hidden.

"Where are they?" the Commandant General said.

"In the caves in the berg. There are great caves there.

Many hundred yards long and very wide. That is where they will make their stand."

Camping near the ruined town the Boers waited till morning, sleeping, secure in their arms and the knowledge that sentries would alarm them if there was any danger of attack. Before the first grey of dawn all were mounted, in case an attack should develop, and then as the sun climbed into the sky they turned their horses' heads to the mountains, following Schalk who led the way on his black horse.

Riding in loose extended order they moved over the open country. They crossed the defiles a few at a time under the cover of dismounted burghers who lay ready to fire. Low range after range was crossed in this fashion—first by the burghers. Then the wagons lumbered up with mounted guards.

At last they reached a long kloof that ended in a krans.

Schalk pulled up his horse and pointed to the dark opening of a cave that was partially masked by bush and a low stone wall. With the spyglasses the Boers could see new defences of little walls, trenches, and piles of bush strategically arranged. They saw armed Kaffirs scurrying about and knew that they had found Makapan and his people. This would be where, like a wounded lion, the last of the tribe would stand at bay.

All necessity for haste was now over. Some Boers galloped forward to pin down the enemy with desultory fire, but the rest dismounted, off-saddled, left their tired horses to graze under guard and strung themselves out in a thin line across the veld which here in this wide open kloof was almost devoid of cover so no Kaffir could creep up upon them and take them unawares.

Before long the wagons came up and were laagered—wagon tongue to wagon bed in a great defensive circle. The cattle went off to join the horses, after being watered at a small bright stream that ran nearby, springing out of the naked rock and forming a small pool, surrounded by maidenhair fern,

THE KAFFIRS ASSEMBLE

before it bubbled away on its course, in a series of tiny waterfalls.

The organisation was soon complete. It was decided that to attack the Kaffirs would be too expensive of life. So the plan was to invest the caves and starve them out. Guards were mounted near the caves from which an occasional ill-aimed shot was fired. Others were stationed at the wagons and the remainder of the Boers proceeded to sit smoking in groups with their backs against the scattered boulders, or lay outstretched sleeping on the grass with their guns beside them. All men gave Schalk great credit for his knowledge of the caves, which even people living within a few miles of them had not known.

Soon the cooking fires were sending up their thin ribbons of blue smoke and the smell of roasted meat and coffee filled the air. There were some women with the wagons, those who could not be left alone on exposed and outlying farms, and others who wished to come with their men, such as the Commandant's wife, a veteran of many wars.

The working oxen and the great herd of cattle taken from Makapan spotted the rounded hills to the south of the camp. There were too many to bring them all into the laager, so only the spans of trained working beasts were kraaled. A few of the oldest and steadiest oxen were left out to hold the Kaffir beasts. Among the animals that had been taken were Herman Potgieter's span and those of the other wagons that had accompanied him. So were the five spans of the people killed at Moorddrift. So also were the English officer's cattle, among them the spotted one that Herman Potgieter had recognised, and which many other men also knew, for to these men each ox was as recognisable as a man if seen on several occasions.

This was the scene among the Boers. A great military picnic of three hundred men enlivened by the company of half a dozen women and girls. Except for an occasional shot the scene was one of peace. Day after day these scenes repeated themselves. The Boers resting, not even bored, because they

were content enough in the knowledge of what was to come. But in the caves the Kaffirs became daily more desperate.

Sybella was annoyed with both herself and Simon. The boy she had played with at the Cape had become not only a man, but something of a hero, a practised trader, a tried fighter in the war, a man whose opinion was considered by other men. He had grown a yellow beard which caught the sun and gleamed like gold. Somehow she felt she had lost her power over him, though he still looked at her with longing. More, in this press of people there was little chance to be alone with him. Her own beauty had increased too and she was well aware of it. Her body had changed from that of a girl into a woman ready for love, and Simon was not the only one who followed her with his eyes. She had tried making him jealous with some of the other young Boers but their silent courtship, their lack of conversation or of interests other than farming and hunting left her cold.

Her maid was no help, nor had she much time to give her mistress with so many men and their coloured servants about. Kattie had affairs of her own to consider and was seldom near the wagon even when needed. Mina, the girl Simon had picked up—somehow to herself Sybella never said rescued—was quiet and self-contained. They slept together in the kartel of the wagon but she did not feel near to her.

Sybella looked up at Simon as he came toward her and then looked down at her father's shirt which she was mending, letting her long black lashes lie over her cheeks. She felt him sit beside her, so near that his forearm brushed her skirt. Only then did she look up and into his eyes.

He said, "Sybella?"

"Ja, Simon."

He pulled a drawing book and pencil from his pocket and said, "I want to draw you."

THE KAFFIRS ASSEMBLE

"You mean you want a picture of me?" Sybella said. "You have waited a long time." She felt herself blushing, for they both knew of the early drawings he had made of her.

"Long enough," Simon said. What he wanted to say was, "You have changed. You are a child no longer. You are the woman I was coming to court and carry off to my father's house." But the words did not come to his tongue.

Sybella picked up her little sewing basket, got to her feet and said, "You have waited too long I think." She wondered how to get away before she was overcome by her confusion, and slipping past him she climbed into the wagon, leaving Simon pencil in hand on the ground below her, sitting beside her empty chair.

17. The Siege

AFTER TEN days the Boers were becoming annoyed at the delay, restive with inaction. The Kaffirs were safe within the cave. Three hundred friendly natives and fifty wagons had been employed hauling rocks and bush to wall them in under the cover of the Boers' guns. But still they were little nearer to their goal and Schalk decided to go to the Commandant General with a plan that he thought worth trying. As he walked out from the great laager of wagons to find him he looked with pleasure at the hobbled horses, at the cattle being driven to water, at the golden cliffs in whose depths the Kaffirs were so securely hidden.

Ja, it was a good plan. One at any rate which was worth trying.

At last he came upon Marthinus Pretorius with a group of other older men. "General," Schalk said, "I have a plan."

"Ja," Pretorius said, "that is what we need. What we were talking about. As long as they have food and water we can't get at them."

"We can hurry them a little perhaps," Schalk said.

"What is your plan?"

"To get bush and trees, General," he said, "and smoke them out as we do tigers in the Cape."

The men nodded their bearded heads. "It's a good plan," one said. "It can do no harm," said another. "It will occupy the young men," the General said. "Ja, we will do it."

For the next few days the men worked cutting trees and hauling them with spans of oxen and finally the fire was lit. The smoke drove the Kaffirs back from the entrance of their stronghold. A few bolted like rabbits from their burrows and were shot, but most remained within. That they were dying was evident from the smell of death which came from the cave. So great was it that the Boer lines were withdrawn and the position of the laager changed.

Then Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger, the young field cornet who was second in command under Potgieter, decided on a plan of his own. Simon was beside him when he made it.

"Simon," Kruger said, "I am going in. I talk Kaffir like one of them and I am going to try to lure them out. Too many are dying. It is the leaders alone we must kill."

"You are going in?" Simon said. He admired this thick-set man some eight years older than himself. He had a great reputation as a hunter, leader and fighter. "If you go I shall come with you," Simon said. "But how are we going to get in?"

"At night," Kruger said. "We will strip, darken our skins and get in by a crack in the hill that I know. It is the way that some Kaffirs have escaped."

When night fell they darkened their skins with burnt cork and fat, and leaving their guns crept into the cave.

Conditions within were worse than they had imagined. By the light of the small fires the Kaffirs had kindled, men, already half skeletons, sat crouched. There were many dead lying on the floor of the great cavern. No child had survived, for the women's breasts hung milkless. In a dark corner a crowd stood or squatted, half awake and half asleep, half-dead it seemed to Simon whose stomach was turning at the smell. For it was not only the dead. None of the hundreds within these walls had been outside for any purpose for two weeks.

Feeling safe in the darkness the two men advanced and Kruger spoke to them in the Kaffir tongue. "Come out," he said. "Follow me. Let us give ourselves up, for the white men will not harm us common people."

Suddenly someone cried out "Magoa—white man" and the crowd fled deeper into the cavern and began looking everywhere for the white men except in their midst where they stood.

Simon was sweating with fear. His hair seemed to be rising on his head as he followed Kruger who had gone after them and spoke again. This time with greater success, for many followed him.

When counted it appeared that he had drawn a hundred and seventy women and older children from the cave after him who never dreamed that it was really a white man who led them till it was too late.

The following day, with traces of burnt cork and grease still on them, Kruger and Simon were called to the Commandant General's wagon where he sat with some of the other elder burghers.

"What's this? I hear," he said, "that you reckless young men ventured into the caves alone last night."

"Ja," Kruger said, "we did, and we brought out some women and children, thus saving their lives. We also got a good idea of the state of things within, of the dead, the dying and the starving."

"You did all this, but you are a leader, and you led him," the General pointed to Simon, "into danger and indiscipline, though as God Almighty above us knows discipline is foreign to the Boers' nature, each of whom deems himself a general. Ja," he said, "there is nothing I can do. You are free burghers. But I will not have my fighting men risk their lives like this." He stood up and put his hand on Kruger's shoulder. "Will

you give me your word you will not try to go into the caves again? ”

“ My word,” Kruger said. “ Ja, General, you have it. I have never been so frightened in my life before.”

“ And you, young man? You also promise? ”

“ Ja, I promise,” Simon said, his heart happy that Kruger had been as frightened as he had been himself. Yet when he had spoken to the Kaffirs there had been no tremor in his deep voice. The people had followed him like sheep and their lives had been saved.

The Kaffirs, now driven desperate, began to fight harder. They climbed over the fifteen hundred drags of trees and stones that had been flung into the entrance and reoccupied some defences they had built there before the attack.

Piet Potgieter led some men against these new positions and before they had driven the Kaffirs back into the cave he was shot in the stomach, falling among the enemy. Kruger, followed by Simon, leaped among them, picked up the wounded man who was very heavy, and made their way back to the Boer lines under the burghers’ covering fire. Once again the two were reprimanded. But Kruger fought back, saying, “ Must I leave my general to the Kaffirs to be tortured and eaten by these cannibals like his uncle Herman? Are there men here,” he glared around him, “ who give such counsel? If there are such,” he spat in the dust, “ we are no longer a people, a volk, a race designated by God to bring civilisation to this savage land.” With that he turned on his heel and, followed by Simon, now his devoted ally, left the council of elders who had dared to suggest that he had done wrong.

But it was all for nothing. Though Potgieter’s wounds were cleansed, the bleeding stopped with cobwebs and dressed with turpentine, he died without regaining consciousness, and another Potgieter, a great family among the voortrekkers, had died in the service of his people.

THE MASK

He was a big man, so big that his body filled the whole wagon which drew him home to his farm at Middelfontein where he was buried by a big seringa tree beneath which he had loved to sit.

The death of one of their leaders cast a gloom over the Commando. The end was so certain now. A matter of days only. It seemed unnecessary. Why had he exposed himself to that furious and desperate fire? What a tragedy that two men, both so well known and liked, both leaders of renown—first the uncle and then the nephew—should die like this.

Sybella was sick with fever. Jappie was asleep on a pile of blankets beside her. For the moment there was no firing. No shot broke the stillness of the evening and Mina, unable to bear the confinement of the camp any longer, stole out into the veld leaving the war in the hills behind her to seek the wildflowers that were her joy. Somehow picking flowers, even seeking them, gave her mind peace and caused her to forget, for a moment at any rate, her loneliness, her dependent position, her responsibility for her baby brother, the loss of her mother and their small fortune of gold that the Kaffirs had taken, and above all her love for Simon, the young trader, who filled her heart. Or was it to think of him better that she sought isolation? Was it that she wanted to be alone with her thoughts and her body's desire for him? Was it for this? She saw some Boers watching over the cattle. If she stood so that she did not see the guards it was a pastoral scene and the horrors of war could be forgotten. Turning her back on them she wandered on.

Simon, who had been passing the time of day with one of the cattle guards, saw her, and feeling she should not be out alone followed her at some distance, unseen by the girl. Without his meaning it somehow the distance between them was reduced. She slowed down looking for flowers and him hurrying to

protect her. And rounding one of the small folds in the rolling country he came upon her.

"Simon," she said.

"Ja," he said, "I followed you but did not mean to disturb you. I felt it was not safe for you alone."

The girl laughed.

He thought what a lovely laugh she had, and how seldom he had heard it, for her sorrow still pressed upon her.

"Oh," she said, "you're still intent on saving me. Twice is not enough?"

Simon laughed too, and put his arm around her slim shoulders.

She came nearer to him.

His hand found the softness of her breast. The night he had held her to him came back into his mind. He had saved her then and again later. She was his for the taking. She had said so. Every movement of her body against his proclaimed it again. It was evening. The whole veld was bathed in lilac light. The trees threw long shadows of indigo over the harsh cropped grass. Without knowing it, guided by some unseen force, they were moving toward a narrow opening between some heavy scrub. It ended in a little open patch of fine grass, cropped short by the hares and dassies, which lay like a fine brown carpet over the red soil. Above them was one of the bigger thorns, its flat canopy of narrow leaves a ceiling above their heads. Below it a few yards away was an old ant heap, rounded as a pillow. They sat down upon it.

Simon's hands sought her body, the softness of her belly, and her thighs. This little isolated sylvan chamber in the veld became an Eden, a garden of paradise. He was Adam. The girl Eva. There was no snake to tempt them. The snake had done that before, titillating them with danger, with death, with the swift fires that burned up in their blood. Their bodies were joined in love.

The girl knew nothing except an escape into her desired dream of being possessed by the man above her. Beyond his face were the leaves of the thorn tree, and then the skies of heaven darkening with the evening.

The boy too knew only release of the tensions and fears that had possessed him for months, possessed him since he had seen the nakedness of Sybella and her maid bathing in the river by the swinging weavers' nests in the reeds of the Colony.

For both a dream was answered and neither looked further than this. Each knew a strange sense of security unknown a few minutes earlier, each knew that a strange bond, the man and woman bond that would lash them in the knot of association, had been tied.

Mina pulled down her pink dress, smoothed her hair, pulled up her kappie which hung by its strings from her neck. They looked at each other, kissed, and began to retrace their steps. When they had gone a little distance Mina turned. "I forgot my flowers," she said, and ran back to pick them up where they lay scattered upon the anthill.

18. The Death of a Multitude

FOR THE Boers the days still passed in uneventful boredom. There were the usual cattle guards, the usual men watching the front of the cave, the usual party standing by with their horses ready in case of an attack from the rear by Mapela or other unknown Kaffir allies. There were hunting parties going out to shoot meat, but these duties left plenty of time for rest under the trees, for bathing in the spruit—where in spite of the drought the water still stood in isolated pools—and target practice, a sport of which the Boers never seemed to tire.

So Simon and Mina were able to profit by this lull to meet secretly in the little copse that had become a kind of home to them. Every day, at some hour that they prearranged, they would move toward it from different directions. This spot daily became more beautiful to them. They thought that the same doves cooed over their heads, that the same tortoise met them on the little path they had tramped over the veld, that the same steenbok stared at them unafraid with its great black liquid eyes from the tall grass where it had its form.

For each, despite the adventures that had befallen Simon, the Kaffir war had ceased to exist. They lived in and by their love. Their hearts, minds, and bodies were one. Time had no meaning or value to them. It was just something to pass till they met again.

After Sybella's rebuff Simon felt no compunction about Mina. All the ardour that one girl had aroused was spent upon

the other, thoughts of whose soft and beautiful body filled his waking hours and his dreams at night.

For Mina Simon was the centre of her world. Circumspect to arouse no suspicion, she still watched his every movement and anticipated his every wish. His voice was always in her ears. So these two lived in a private world of love, peopled only by the birds that watched them and the animals that they saw upon the veld as they hurried to their meeting place. The camp where they lived was merely the place they spent their time when apart, the dying Kaffirs nothing but the anchor that held them to this spot—the means by which they were attaining their private ends. For love to them at this time was an end, a thing complete in itself as they gave themselves to each other.

The full beauty of woman had been unknown to Simon. The soft warmth of her body, the melting glance, the soft loving fingers, the breasts that were made to fit the cup of his hands, the secret thighs that were his so readily.

Sometimes he thought about the duality of his life—of love and death so neatly fitted into the days and nights that he now lived. The stink of death from the caves and the perfume that rose from Mina's almost white gold hair. And with all this was his new affection for Paulus Kruger, the young field cornet from Rustenburg, a strange, strong young man with an implicit belief in the wisdom of God. A man who, if he lived, would go far.

So the sun rose and set each day on a routine of duty that Simon performed in a dream, and a dream life of love, a life which, except when he was with Mina, was utterly without reality. For Simon life was opening like a flower. The fullness of his manhood had come upon him.

In the darkness of the cave, death came nearer every hour. Not an hour passed without a death. Only the strongest now

survived and these the proud warriors of a few weeks ago were now leaning on their spears to stand.

The grain stored in the great Kaffir pots was almost done. The polluted water stank. The dead lay everywhere.

Negende, the doctor, alone seemed unchanged. He could grow no thinner, no more desiccated. He was like a leather thong that was animated with evil life—something indestructible—both less and more than human.

Sekuni, one of Negende's leading assistants, was in charge of feeding the holy snake which now lived in a pit in the cave. Rats were still caught for it, and dassies, so the snake waxed fat, while the people starved. But Sekuni failed to see why the snake should profit by man's disaster, for surely it was the snake that had brought all this trouble upon them. Besides, a snake could go a long time without food—weeks, even months—so secretly, which was easy since none but he and Negende approached this area of the cave, he stole the rats and dassies and ate them. Thus his belly was full and his mind active. He saw that Negende had been wrong in thinking that the Boers would not starve them out. First the children had died, the young children whose mothers' breasts became dry from hunger. Then older children and old men and women, till now at this moment only the young men and women were left alive.

In his explorations of the caves in the past he had found a crack through which a man could crawl and gain the hillside near a deep hidden kloof that led to another cave where Negende and the doctors before him, for no one knew how many years, had stored their ivory and the more sacred garments of their profession. All the doctor's assistants knew this cave for this was where they prepared their most valuable medicines. It was here they had taken the remaining portions of the white men's bodies that had not been abandoned in their flight.

THE MASK

A plan began to mature in Sekuni's head. He sought Negende out and drew him aside. Not that this was hard for wherever he was the people drew away from him in fear. For this man had caused the death of hundreds in his time with his purgings of the disloyal, of the intelligent, of the rich, of those who dared to deny him what he sought in women, ivory or cattle, in his sacrifices to God. Some had died at his own hand by poison, some at the hands of his assistants, but most by the king's killers who slew at his command. There was an aura of death about this ancient man, this wrinkled creature whose loins still lusted for the fairest maids, whose mind still intrigued for the riches he could not use but could only pass on to his foul hierarchy when, eventually, he died.

"Well," Negende said to Sekuni, "what is it? What news have you?"

"None, O father," Sekuni said, "but my mind is full. I have a plan."

"Let me hear it, for I too have plans."

"My father, all here will die."

"That is true," Negende said. "All. But I have no intention of dying till I am ready."

"Then listen to my plan. There is a way out of this place which I know. You and I and two others will escape, capture a white man so that we can make new medicine, and depart hence into the north among the Bavenda who knowing our reputation will be glad to give us refuge."

"There is wisdom in your words," Negende said. "I have taught you well—you will be my successor. We will take the snake and go. Aaic, we will go, but how shall we capture this white man?"

"Oh father, when we get out I will lie still in the bush till one comes near. They walk everywhere, having nothing to fear while they wait for us to die. I will promise him riches—the elephants' teeth in the cave. And there the others will set upon

THE DEATH OF A MULTITUDE

him. These white men are mad for riches. And is that not your teaching, oh wise one, to seek in each the weakness that besets him most, be it women or meat? Or wealth or power? These are the temptations by which we live, playing the one against the other."

"You have spoken well. Go, Sekuni, make your plans."

Simon was out with Franz, one of Schalk's servants, when he heard a sound in the bush near him. He raised his gun. They were six hundred yards from the cave in a kind of ravine where he hoped to find a duiker. A voice cried to him, "Do not shoot. I surrender."

"Come out," Simon shouted. "Come out or I fire."

A Kaffir crept out—lean, emaciated as a greyhound, he could only just stand.

"Throw down your spear," Simon said.

The Kaffir dropped it.

"Pick it up, Franz," Simon said to the servant.

"Now?" he said to the man.

"Lord," the man said, "I bargain for my life."

"There is no bargain."

"I will show you elephants' teeth. A cave full."

"If you can show me it might help you, but I make no promise."

"I will do it," the man said. "I will take the white man's word."

"Ja," Simon said, "you murdering bastard. To-day you will take my word because you are defeated. Magtig," he said, "though you stand there alive you are already dead so you take this chance."

The man grovelled on the ground. "Come," he said, "you will see I do not lie."

"This may be a trap," Simon said.

"It is no trap."

"Nevertheless I will tie you," Simon said, and undid a riem he had round his waist that he had brought to sling any buck he shot about the shoulders of his servant. He tied the man's hands behind his back and handed the end of the line to Franz.

"Now," he said, "if you try to escape I will shoot."

"Shoot," the man said.

"What is your name?" Simon asked.

"Sekuni," the man said. "Sekuni, the chief assistant to Negende the doctor."

So he was one of them, a witch doctor. One of the vile breed who had drawn Herman Potgieter's bowels from his flayed body while he still lived. Simon's finger was on the trigger. He almost pressed it.

"Lord, we are beaten, finished," the Kaffir said. "We die. There is no hope, now that the white one is dead."

"White one?"

"Yes lord, the great white snake that is our spirit." That this was a lie meant nothing to him.

Simon pushed him in the back with the muzzle of his gun. "Lead on," he said. "If there is a trap you die."

They went up the kloof. First Sekuni, then the servant with the riem in his hand, then Simon bringing up the rear with his gun at the ready.

In his heart Sekuni was laughing. Oh, these white fools. There was ivory ahead of them. Five hundred or more elephants' teeth. Some so great that a single man could not lift it without difficulty. But also there was death. Death for the magoa. In the cave of tusks the killers were concealed, and when this young fool went forward, as he must to examine these hidden riches, they would fall upon him from behind. Then they would have him and any food he had on his person, for the Bocrs generally carried some biltong with them, and his pipe and tobacco and his gun. There would be one white man

THE DEATH OF A MULTITUDE

less and new medicine from his blood and parts which would ensure their safety. For medicine like everything else lost efficacy when it was not fresh. So his heart was happy with the thought of blood and of a man betrayed by his lust for riches. How well the doctors understood the hearts of men. Inevitably he would peer at the tusks and attempt to test their weight, resting his gun the while he did so, and stand defenceless as a child.

Sekuni led them on. How often had he done this? Caught men in their avarice, their craving for cattle or for woman's flesh? In each man there was a weakness. In each some temptation before which they were helpless. This was the trade of the doctor—to discover and exploit the weaknesses of men, and of women too. To watch, to learn, and to profit by his knowledge. He thought of all Nègende had taught him. Of how he had said, "This is ended. The people of Makapan are ended. But the doctors are not finished. Neither we nor our secret knowledge can die."

The kloof ended in a small kran which was easily climbed. Then they followed a little path that seemed to disappear suddenly into a hidden crevice. Then it opened up again into a passage between two walls of rock, and there before them was the entrance of the cave. Its centre was pierced from above so that the sunlight flooded it. All around the walls, safe from the weather, stood piled tusks, some taller than a man.

Magtig, thought Simon, so he did not lie.

As if he knew what he was thinking, Sekuni said, "Lord, I did not lie." But the young fool did not go near the tusks to examine them. He stood in the light in the centre of the cave.

Unafraid of guns, conscious of his own powers, Nègende now crept forward like a snake. Since Sekuni's plan had failed he would take over. All he had to do was hold this man's attention while the others struck. His accoutrements of strung

tortoise-shells and jawbones, the skulls of birds and animals, the pieces of skins which formed his cloak, the half stuffed python which, dragging out behind him, all helped the illusion of his serpentine approach. They were bound to fascinate and hold the attention of this young fool. His eyes blazed almost yellow in his wrinkled face beneath the great snake head that covered his own shaven skull. He advanced hissing and writhing through the grey dust of the cave. All his power was concentrated on his victim, all the power of his ancient body, all his knowledge was in his eyes, eyes that pierced the man before him like spears, holding him pinned in the tracks of horror. To how many had he done this in all his uncountable years, to how many whom he had smelled out and condemned to death? To a thousand or two thousand. To men and women, to the girls who in his younger days had refused him. In a moment he would rise like a cobra to strike. At that instant his assistants would fall upon the white man as he stood mesmerised by this wild hissing form that challenged him.

Aaie, it was not for nothing that he had seen so many slain. Not for nothing that he had studied the human heart and brain and spirit. Greed, avarice, lust, fear, hate, these were the things that ruled the hearts of men—things of which he was the master. Like a snake prepared to strike he gathered himself together, getting his skinny legs beneath him as if they were coils, then suddenly, like some terrible jack-in-the-box, he straightened up, raising his arms above his head, flexing his wrists and pointing with both his hands at the white man in front of him. The ruffle of stinking skins he wore about his shoulders which was attached to his forearms now expanded like a hood about his head. For an instant, Simon almost thought he was confronted by a mythical beast, half man, half serpent—almost but not quite. In his mind he saw the jackal dance again, that maniacal jackal coupling, but something was missing here. There had not been the slow impact

that had built up the illusion, if it had been an illusion, of the dance. Again this time he was armed, blooded by war, a man—no longer a boy—through the things he had seen in the last weeks. The horrors, the experiences. Changed by war and the experience of love, changed by blood, by the iron of weapons, by the soft pliancy of a girl's body, by a new alertness on which his life like that of a wild beast had come to depend.

To Negende's horror he paid him no attention, but swung to the right firing one shot, and then jumping back he fired another to the left. The two assassins fell screaming, torn to pieces by the buckshot that struck them in their bellies at close range. The servant jerked the riem. Sekuni fell and with one blow Franz drove his knife into his heart.

For a second Negende paused as if frozen by his own impotence. Then he dived, escaping like a dassie through a narrow passage between the tusks. Simon reloaded both barrels of his gun with care. Then, hardly looking at the dying men who lay writhing in their blood, he said, "Come, Franz, we are going to see what else is here."

Franz picked up the heavy rhinoceros horn kerrie that one of their assailants had dropped, followed his master past the tusks into a narrow passage, and on into still another room that must have been Negende's holy of holies. It was dimly lit by holes pierced through the living rock. Simon told Franz to strike fire and light an ancient lamp which he could see fastened to the wall by a loop of leather. There was an abominable smell of putrefaction, of blood and grease, of ancient skins, of wood smoke and the smoke of aromatic herbs.

As the fat flared the contents of the cave which was almost square, like a room, became apparent. Hanging from pegs in the wall were every kind of witch doctor's costume and mask; there were kilts and cloaks of grass; garments of skin; skilfully made costumes of lions, tigers, baboons, wolves, and jackals, designed so that the beasts' faces covered the head of the

man who wore them. There were hundreds of bundles of dried leaves and roots; there were heaps of stones of different kinds; there were chunks of red and yellow ochre, of white kaolin, of charcoal; there were dried birds' skins and skulls of every kind—baboon, jackal, snake, fish, vulture, civet. There were strings of tiger, lion and crocodile teeth, the head of a crocodile prepared to be worn as a mask. There were long ceremonial walking-sticks with curiously carved heads for handles; there were bells of many kinds. Some European cowbells stolen from cattle, some long and odd shaped like the testicles of a billy goat. Dried bats hung upside down as they had in life, beside strings of blown birds' eggs.

This place was a museum of horror. It was impossible for Simon not to wonder what sights all these costumes had seen, and to what foul purpose the hanging vegetable and animal specimens were put. Certainly there were poisons here—love charms and death charms.

But his attention was drawn away from the walls by his servant's cry of "Magtig, baas. Baas, kom—kom kyk. Come look, before God the Father, come look before I fall fainting Master," he cried, pointing to two great pots in the embers of a blackened hearth. "Master," he shouted almost screaming, "there are men cooking in here. Parts of men, of white men."

Simon moved over and put his arm about the near fainting boy, who was beginning to vomit, and looked. It was true, there were portions of legs and arms still warm in a kind of soup in one pot. In the other, that was cooling off, were human bowels and a skimmer made of wood that was being used to remove the congealing fat of their distillation.

"Devils," Simon said. "Cannibals." Again he thought of what they had found at Makapan's stadt. Devils and cannibals. Then he too vomited on to the filthy floor still stained by the blood of butchery and murder.

"Come," Simon said, recovering himself, "let's leave this place."

They went back to the laager and again Simon sought out Paulus Kruger to tell him what they had done and found.

"So you killed three of the old witch doctor's men," Kruger said. "Magtig, that is good, Jong. It is a pity he escaped but with him gone they will lose heart. And now lead me to the cave. I must see what you have seen. But we will take some men with us and sacks and baskets for the remains that you have found. They must have Christian burial."

Simon thought, burial . . . He had already seen enough. Are we to do nothing but bury our friends, Paulus? "There is nothing you can recognise," Simon said, "only that they are white."

"Only then that they are Christian," Kruger said.

With a handful of burghers and some servants they left the camp and Simon led them to the cave.

Kruger looked at the ivory. "Some of this is very old," he said. "A hundred or more years old. We do not find many such big tuskers now."

They looked at the witch doctor's helpers lying dead. Then they went to the pots.

With reverent hands the Boers removed the portions of human flesh and bones from the pots and scraped up the fat, putting everything into the sacks they had brought, and were about to return when Simon thought he saw a basket move, rolling on its base. For a moment he hesitated. Then he took off the lid, and out slithered the white python. Raising the butt of his gun Simon brought it down on its back. The snake, unable to move now, writhed, twisting and turning about on itself, its sleek white coils curling and uncurling in agony. Picking up a kerrie Simon mashed its head and it died with its white tongue protruding, while the body, still articulate, continued to twist this way and that.

"Now we have strong medicine," Kruger said. "Now when the Kaffirs hear of this there will be an end."

Simon told one of the boys to pick it up. But none dared to do so. So finally he carried it himself, still moving in death, over his arm—a thing of rarity, of beauty in its serpentine fashion, but also a symbol of all horror in the native mind. The guardian spirit of the tribe was dead at last.

That evening Kruger addressed the Kaffirs from behind the Boer lines. "It is over," he said. "Negende your doctor has fled. Three of his servants who also deserted you in your extremity are dead. The white snake, the spirit of your tribe, is dead. I have it in my hands. In the morning when the sun rises you will see it hanging from a wagon whip in our lines. Come out," he shouted. "Come out and give up. Save yourselves, for we will kill none but the guilty—the leaders who led you into war and death."

And in the morning they came out. A few leaders were among them and they were shot. Makapan had escaped. None knew how, but his son was taken. In all one hundred and fifty were left alive in the cave. Fifteen hundred dead were found, and left to the hyenas and jackals and rats that would descend upon this carrion to feast when the Boers had gone.

It did not take them long to go. The wagons were unlaagered and the oxen spanned.

By midday they were off. Their job was done here. The Philistines had been smitten. A hundred eyes had paid for every one. Now they were off over the veld to deal with Mapela.

Mapela, the Boers said to each other as the great whips cracked like echoes of the gunshots that would be heard here no more. Makapan's caves and his dead people were behind them now. Mapela was in front. And after Mapela they would go home to their wives and children, to their stock and the

THE DEATH OF A MULTITUDE

work of farming in a wilderness, of taming it with gun and Bible, freedom from fear their one reward.

The last to leave, some hours after the other wagons were clear away, were the four wagons loaded with ivory and the party that had destroyed the terrible contents of the wizard's cave in a great bonfire that still smouldered as they turned in their saddles to look back.

19. Mapela's Kop

MAPELA'S SCOUTS watched the Boers advance. They came slowly, irrevocably moving forward—a long caterpillar of wagons, the train surrounded and protected by armed mounted men. At night they laagered, taking every precaution against surprise. Their lack of haste an indication of their certainty. And each day the cloud of dust, of small moving figures of men no bigger than ants crept toward Mapela's country. Each night they were nearer. Each evening the dust of the moving column was replaced by the blue smoke of the cooking fires which later, as darkness fell, gleamed like a circle of orange eyes on the veld. The Boers, spare cattle and the captured animals were a great herd moving independently of the main force in their rear, with their herders of Hottentots, Cape folk, tame Kaffirs, and Boers. Mapela's scouts saw women with the wagons and dogs. They heard cocks crow from the laager, for some housewives had brought a few birds with them in open crates slung below the wagons. When they stopped they let them loose and as soon as they saw the wagons being inspanned the chickens jumped back by themselves into their cages.

It was like a town, a moving town of men, women and livestock, that was advancing so confidently.

Mapela knew of Makapan's defeat, of the destruction of his town and the annihilation of his people, and withdrew his tribe on to a high kop which could only be reached along a

narrow neck from the south. He fortified this neck with stones rolled down from above and packed into walls. He dug trenches, offered sacrifice and waited. His captains were convinced that no man could take the neck. That they could defend it. He had brought his hoarded grain—mealies and Kaffir corn—and goats and cattle to this spot where he was going to stand at bay. There was a small pan on the mountain fed by a spring. They could be starved out he knew, but it would be a long siege. The long delayed rains were bound to come soon and then the Boers would be eager to return to their farms to plough. Makapan had been defeated but Makapan's warriors were, he considered, less bold than his own. Makapan's tribe were more numerous and his food supply had been inadequate.

Rough huts had been built to shelter the women and children and warriors who waited unafraid. They had been doctored. They had magic against the white man's lead. Their magic was better than that of Makapan. Besides, most of his people had not died from bullets but of starvation. Nor were they afraid to die in battle for this was the natural function of young men, to kill, and alternatively to be killed.

So while they waited they lived for the moment alone, eating, drinking, lying with their wives and the maids. They sharpened their spears and played with their children. Time for them bore no relation to the white man's time. Waiting was easy. Boredom something they had never heard of. And each day Mapela's scouts brought in more news. Two Boers hunting meat had been killed. Several warriors, bold with youth and inexperience, had exposed themselves and been shot. On the hilltop their women wailed. Their mothers, sisters and the girls who knew them.

At last the Boers were visible on the plain three miles away. They halted and laagered. A screen of mounted men rode toward the kop. Rode around it, and seeing that there was

only one approach which was strongly defended, they returned to their camp.

The next day there was more movement. Six wagons were detached from the Commando, and crossing the neck with double spans, just out of gun shot, blocked it so that the Kaffirs should be unable to make a sortie. Now the Kaffirs could not get out or the Boers get in. All day the Boers laboured with their servants with spans of oxen to strengthen their defences. Trees were dragged up and lashed to the wagons, wings of thorn bush and trees were added to each end of the wagon line across the neck, shelter trenches were dug and the position occupied.

Long-range shots were exchanged without effect and, though it was war, both sides behind their lines lived at peace, apparently undisturbed by the presence of the other. The Boer women and girls hollowed out old ant heaps to make ovens in which to bake bread. They sat on chairs outside their laager, mending clothes and gossiping as if they were at home. Parties of men went hunting, and Simon and Mina, profiting by the general atmosphere of peace, enclosed though it was in the frame of war, met to talk and make love.

Each day the Boers read their great leather-bound Bibles and fired a few sighting shots at a mark. Only on Sunday was the silence unbroken save by the singing of hymns, a new sound to the Kaffirs, who thought this must be some form of preparation for battle. But when the singing stopped nothing took place and from the excitement of being keyed up to meet attack the young warriors relapsed anew into their stupor of waiting, more than ever convinced that their gods and the spirits of their fathers would permit the Boers no further action, and that after a while they would tire and return whence they had come.

The Boer leaders conferred together but no feasible plan was made. Deciding once again that a frontal attack would cost too much, for on the frontier every life was of value, not merely

to the man who might lose it, but to the community. A man was a gun. And guns were their defence and their livelihood. The cattle and horses grew fat and the Boers, thinking of their farms, of their unprotected wives and children, grew restless.

Simon spent much of his spare time near the blue wagon with Schalk and the girls. Mina and he spoke little. They even seemed to avoid each other, but he tossed little Jappie in the air and carved him wooden toys. Sybella and he conducted a kind of flirtation, each saying things that might or might not have more meaning than appeared on the surface. He was profoundly disturbed by Sybella. The pictures he had drawn of her were always in his mind when he looked at her, the image confused with what his eyes and hands knew of Mina. In a way the two girls were one in his mind. Their beauties merging, like two streams into a greater river. Sometimes it even seemed to him that the only way out of this dilemma would be to run for it as soon as the fighting was over. To ride to Schoemansdal, pick up his boys and wagon and take to the road once more till his spirit became more quiet, and his mind cleared. He wanted both girls. He loved both girls. The one wanted him as passionately as he desired her, and the other held him off, yet seemed to promise everything by the looks in her eyes, and the movements of her body. Kattie disturbed him too, for she knew what was in his mind and in her mistress's heart, and seemed always to be on the point of laughing in his face, as if this question which was tearing him apart was a joke. He knew that if he married Mina as he meant to do, Sybella in the end would fade from his consciousness. But while she was there, while she was sitting beside him, he could feel the warmth of her thighs through his clothes. Sometimes she put her hand on his bare forearm. Sometimes when he heard her rich voice as she sang about her work his desire for her mounted

into a madness that was only assuaged by making love to Mina, the girl who had given herself to him so simply.

If most of the Kaffirs on Mapela's kop were confident and content to wait, one, Sebeli, was not. He had worked for the Boers in the dorp while he spied for his chief and he knew their strength and tenacity. He both hated and feared them, but he knew that one day they would make up their minds to end this thing. When they did he was not going to fight with a spear against a gun—only a few of Mapela's Kaffirs had guns -- and then be slaughtered like a sheep. With this on his mind he began to look for a way of escape from the kop. There must be a way. And in his careful explorations of the krans he at last discovered a tiny and dangerous track, something more suitable for baboons than men, which led down its face.

He would never have discovered it if he had not one afternoon been watching a dassie near the edge of the cliff dive over it and disappear. If there was a hole there he thought he might set a snare and catch it. But when he peered over the edge, he saw behind a screen of bush, some five feet down, a low platform of rock and beyond it an ancient, almost invisible track that led to the bottom. One day he would escape this way.

While the Boers waited upon circumstance and God to deliver the enemy into their hands Simon decided to go off by himself and do some sketching. There was no danger, as he was never more than five hundred yards from the laager.

Mapela's kop rose out of an upper plain in the foothills and he settled down to draw it with his back against a tree. His mind was on Mina whom he would meet later, on the Kaffirs, and the battle with Makapan that was just over, with its attendant horrors, fifteen hundred dead, the caves of cannibals they had found, and he drew almost automatically as a dis-

traction from his thoughts. His eyes and his hands working almost independently of his mind.

Only when he had been working an hour did he concentrate on his sketch, and then stood up in surprise. Drawn in the face of the cliff opposite him was a dark line like a fault running from the bottom of the krans to the top. If that was only a path, he thought. But if it was not a path, what was it? He looked more carefully with his mind as well as his eyes, and it certainly looked like one. -He moved forward carelessly, never looking at the cliff till he was nearly under its lee, where he could not be observed from above, and found that he had been right. Buck had used it—he saw their sign—and baboons. It would be a hard climb but it might be possible to bold men.

He decided to consult Paulus Kruger who was now his hero and see what he thought about it. It took him an hour to find him.

"Well," Kruger said, "what brings you here so urgently?" Simon had been walking fast to overtake him.

"I was drawing, Paulus," he said.

"Ja, you are an artist. Drawing is as natural to you as hunting is to me, but what is it that troubles you?"

"Nothing," Simon said, "but kyk. Look at this." He pulled his sketchbook from his pocket. "This is Mapela's kop from the west."

"Ja," Kruger said, "it is a good drawing."

"Look again. What do you see?" Simon's finger traced the dark line in the drawing that ran diagonally up the cliff. "I drew it before I realised what it was. It is a path. There is buck sign there and baboon spoor."

Kruger said, "Good. So there is something in this business of drawing after all. If this is so I think all positions should be drawn. You have given me an idea. If we had drawings before battle there could be no mistakes. Each leader would know where to take his men. Ja," he said, "it is an idea."

"The path?" Simon said.

"Leave it to me. I will reconnoitre it as soon as dusk falls."

When Simon left him his heart was beating with excitement. This was an idea, Kruger had said. And he was right. Even if he was wrong about the path it was an idea to draw a battle ground. And soon, to-night, he would know what Kruger thought about his plan, about the possibility of an attack to take the enemies in the rear.

Now he put war from his mind and wandered over the veld toward the clump of trees where he had told Mina he would meet her. It was behind the laager and safe from any stray Kaffirs, for it lay under the guns of the cattle guards who had been through the whole area.

Mina in her washed-out pink dress and kappie was waiting behind the trunk of a big thorn that towered into the air above her. She had seen Simon looking for someone near the camp and wondered if he would forget her in his man's preoccupation with war, which she had come to hate with all her heart since it both kept him from her and endangered his life. She had left Jappie with Schalk's bushman of whom the child had become very fond. Perhaps because he was so small, not much bigger than a child of ten himself, perhaps because he was of a simple childlike nature, contented with small things such as playing on his little flute, or chipping arrowheads out of flints and broken glass. So, free of worry and responsibility for an hour or two at last, the girl lived in her dream of love and waited contentedly enough for what would follow. Simon would come, though he might be late, for he was tied to her by the string of his body, by his desire, as buck is tied to the fountain where it drinks. She thought of his face, of his hands upon her, of the yielding of her body to his in their close embrace. So she was ready as a woman for his coming as a man. She waited as the female has always waited for the male whom she

has excited with lust for her body. Woman or buck, mare, heifer, or lioness, there was little difference in the desire or the act, for each according to his fashion obeyed the commands of God to increase and multiply. Each was driven, male to female, female to male, and had been since time began, since Noah took the beasts of the field into his ark, two by two, pair by pair, to this very end.

Her grey eyes darkened when she heard his soft step. Slowly, like a doe ready to run, she peered around the tree. It was Simon. It was her lover coming swiftly, his gun rested over his arm, his face alight with happiness.

"So you are here, my heart," he said.

Passing her tongue over her dry lips she said, "Ja, Simon. I am here. I have been waiting, wondering if you would come, yet knowing that you would be here."

"Only death could stop me," he said.

She put her soft hand over his mouth. "Don't say that," she said. "If one of us must die let it be me." She looked up, wide-eyed, into his face. "If it happened," she said, "you would take Jappic?"

"Ja," he said.

"You promise before God?"

"I promise before God."

She smiled happily. "Then I need not worry."

"You need not worry, my heart, for you are young, strong, and beautiful, and all this is nearly over."

"Ja," she said, "but my mother was strong and healthy and she died. Not yet forty and strong, she died by the spear, Simon." Sometimes it worried her that she did not grieve more over her mother's death, but Simon now filled her heart.

As they walked, seeking a safe retreat, Simon told her that he had discovered a way to climb the krans which would enable them to take Mapela in the rear.

Mina stopped. Her hand was on his arm. "No," she said,

"that will be dangerous. Just stay where you are and starve them out."

"It may take weeks."

"Let it take weeks then," she said passionately. "What are weeks compared to lives of men?"

"The burghers want to get home to their farms, their wives may be in danger, their beasts driven off."

Tears filled Mina's eyes. "Danger," she said. "Magtig, every day there are new dangers, whole days of dangers, and only hours that we can share."

Simon calmed her with his hand upon her shoulder and pulled up her face to kiss it.

A kudu broke from the bush in front of them, its great corkscrew horns laid along its back as it galloped through the heavy cover. They turned toward the game path, followed it a few yards and came into an open place in which there was a pile of big rocks. They had been rubbed smooth by elephants high up, and low down polished by the backs of wart hogs scratching themselves against the stones. Looking more closely they saw furrows where bushmen in the past had straightened their spears and sharpened their arrows. The rocks formed a cleft into which Simon, his gun at the ready, advanced cautiously. Anything might live here. A tiger, even a lioness with cubs. But there was nothing. Mina followed him, and here between the rocks on the sandy floor that had known love before—the love of the little yellow long-dead hunters—they embraced.

The next day when Simon met Kruger, Paulus said, "The plan is made."

"So we can climb the krans?"

"Ja, we can climb it. You and I and a hundred other picked men. We can climb it because I went part of the way and I found not only baboon spoor but the spoor of a man who

had come down. Escaping like a rat from the trap we have set for them."

"And the plan?" Simon said.

"It is simple. To-morrow before dawn we shall feign an attack on the neck with a lot of shouting and shooting, but we will not press it home. This will hold the attention of any who remain in the Kaffir camp. Their eyes will be on the battle they think is developing. In the meantime with the first light we will climb the cliff and take them in the rear. The Kaffirs on the neck will now turn back and run up to help their friends and our men will charge home. Then, caught between the two like mealies in a stamp block, we will make an end. Ja," he said, "it is a good plan and we owe it to your picture."

Simon thought it was a good plan. A fine plan if it worked. He thought of the cliff, of hanging on to its sides with one hand and carrying a gun in the other, of the risk if seen, of being pelted with rocks from above.

That was for the dawn—to-morrow. Now there was another afternoon of love. How closely love and death, love and danger that might mean death, were related, how the one increased the necessity for the other. Of course he would say nothing of this to Mina. But it would be in his mind as he held her.

Dawn found Kruger, Simon and some hundred of the younger burghers assembled at the foot of the cliff. They had been here through the night shivering with cold, unable even to smoke. And now in the grey dawn they slung their shoes about their necks and with their guns loaded with buckshot in their hands began to climb. They could hear the uproar on the neck as the Boers demonstrated against the Kaffir entrenchments.

Sweating with exertion and fear Simon climbed behind Kruger who seemed quite unperturbed, so great was his faith in God. Then suddenly when they were near the top he heard

a Kaffir shout and the click of a hammer against a nipple. But there was no shot. He knew at once what had happened. They had been discovered. A Kaffir had shot Kruger from point blank range but his gun had misfired. He saw Kruger fling himself upon the man and hurl him into the void below.

With the man's scream still echoing, Kruger shouted, "On with your shoes and charge!" He was already up on the flat top of the hill.

Simon found himself beside him. Now at least if he was killed it would be in battle, not by falling from a cliff. Kruger fired at a Kaffir. Another ran toward him with a raised assegai. Simon shot him as Kruger reloaded and then reloaded himself. Now all the party were up. The Kaffirs who had been resting in the huts were attacking them from all sides. More Kaffirs were running up from the neck, but the Boers, climbing over the defences at the neck, were shooting them down as they ran. The two lots of Kaffirs were now joined in a compact body which made every Boer shot tell on several men. Screaming with fury they tried to fight back, bravely for a few minutes, and then seeing how they were falling, seeing the ground black with moaning bodies, slippery with blood, the Kaffirs broke and flung themselves over the precipitous sides of the kop. In their attempts to escape most were dashed to pieces. Some clung to shrubs that grew out of the cliff and were shot, or, failing to maintain their grip, fell screaming to their deaths. In half an hour it was over. Mapela's people were no more. The war was over. And the trees below the hills were festooned with Kaffir dead hanging, sprawled like black fruit from the branches.

20. The Spear

BUT NOT all the Kaffirs were dead. A few had escaped and were scattered, half starving in the hills, living on roots, wild fruits and such small game as they could trap. Among them was Sebeli. His heart was sore, filled with hate as his belly was filled with the hunger of its emptiness. He had not waited for the end and had not hesitated to take the path down the cliff that he had found. At the moment he was lying hidden in a rock crevice not far from the Boer camp. It was his intention to try to get some food by stealing one of the calves or goats captured from his people. An ox would be too hard to kill. Besides they were more carefully watched. If he could manage it with safety he would kill a white man too, if he could come upon one isolated and unprepared. He knew there was a chance of this for with both Makapan and Mapela broken they would grow careless with triumph.

This time Sybella had only feigned illness. This time her fever was born of jealousy and having seen Mina go to what she was sure was another meeting on the veld with Simon she crept out after her. Flowers indeed! The stink of the flowers that girl kept bringing to the wagon and arranging in a Kaffir pot as if it was a house made her sick. Flowers, she thought, it is not flowers that she picks but her own that she offers.

She knew the thoughts in Mina's mind, for the same desire swelled in her body till it could not be borne. The hopes,

the waiting, the watching. He would come she was sure. She had made no mistake about the place. Ja, she knew, for in her mind she had often been Mina, offering what he took from this verdamnt girl, beneath the trees and under the burning sky of Africa. On the ground like animals, she thought. Ja, like the beasts of the field. But she knew she was unjust. That the hard ground would not have deterred her. But as she followed she did not know what she wanted exactly. Was it to know? To be certain? And then what would she do? Confront them with their crime? But was it a crime? She was not betrothed to Simon. And would they be the first or the last to profit by such opportunity? Or did she want to watch, to savour, vicariously, what she felt should have been hers, and would have been if this girl had not turned up, had not been saved from death in such romantic and heroic manner. If only she had taken her maid's advice and acted sooner. Even at the Cape. That was why he had run from her. Because he wanted her.

And why had she missed him in the dorp and on the road, where their paths had unknowingly crossed, where the spoor of their wagons must have been wedded lying invisible side by side in the dust of those wild roads, neither knowing that the other had passed yet bedded in the same bed upon the same ground, separated only by time, by the evil providence that had conspired first to keep them apart and then to fling this lovely golden-haired grey-eyed maiden into his arms. She knew in her heart that Simon loved her. But he loved Mina too, particularly now that she was his, that his hands and body knew hers. Mine he knows too, she thought, but only with his eyes. A shiver ran over her at thought of his hands on her, of his body clasping hers, pressing it down as she yielded to him.

Stealthily, almost invisible in her black frock, Sybella slipped from tree to tree, from bush to bush, behind the girl she was following. Sometimes she was only twenty yards away, some-

THE SPEAR

times when there was no cover she had to wait longer and make a detour. Skilled in hunting from having watched her father, she ran barefooted over the veld as silently as a tiger stalking its prey. If she could have killed Mina she would have, yet she loved her too, for the girl was sweet, friendly, kindly without as far as she could see a single vice. More, despite having plenty of reasons for it, she never complained and took care of her little brother as if he was her own child. The hate she had for this girl was that of a woman for another woman who has come between herself and the man she has marked for her own, of something that has come between the lioness and her kill.

From his crack in the rocks Sebeli saw the two girls. Two girls alone, one stalking the other. Creeping out, he stalked them both with all the skill of his race. Naked but for his loin cloth, his black skin invisible against the darker shadows of the rocks and bushes, he gained on them fast. There would be no food in this, but revenge and sport. He would kill one, and take the other before he killed her. In his mind he saw it all. The swift thrust, the dying sob, and then the spring upon a fleeing girl who could offer no resistance. First he would kill the one in black. Then deal with the other, the one with pale yellow hair such as he had never seen before.

Suddenly to Sybella's astonishment Mina turned back and came toward her.

"Why are you following me?" she asked, as if she did not know.

"Following you?" Sybella said, and then giving up all pretence, said, "How did you know?"

"Know?" Mina said. "Have I not lived all my life among wild animals and men, among hunters, not to know when there are eyes upon me, when something is upon my spoor?"

Sybella laughed. "I should have guessed," she said. "Ja, I was following you. I wished to watch you meet your lover and lie with him under the trees on the ground like an animal."

Mina was not angry. "Does love need a bed?" she said. "Did our father Adam and Eva his wife have a bed?" Her grey eyes flashed suddenly with anger. "And you," she said, "would you need a bed with Simon?"

"Bed," Sybella spat. "No, no bed but a simple ceremony known as marriage."

Mina laughed in her face. "Before, or after? And do you think God really cares? Did he care that my mother is dead, our wagon and all we possessed destroyed? Ja, it is easy to talk of God. And is not love God's wish? If not, why did he put such desire into the loins of men and bellies of women? Are we too not God's creatures?"

While the girls quarrelled the Kaffir had crept toward them from bush to bush, like a jackal or a snake, upon his belly. Now with a wild cry he rose, stood poised an instant to fling his spear. The one in black would die first. Aaie, the one in black. Then . . . as he threw the spear Mina flung herself in front of Sybella. She never knew what prompted her to do it, only that it was her nature to save even if she died.

Two hundred yards away Simon had seen what was happening. He was breathing hard from running. He had been coming to meet Mina. He had seen Sybella meet her and wondered what to do next, wondered what the girls would say to each other. Then he had seen the Kaffir and had run forward. It was still too far to shoot.

He saw Mina fall transfixed and the Kaffir seize Sybella's arm. He heard her scream. He sat down, resting his elbows on his knees. He raised his gun. A hundred and fifty yards with Sybella struggling in the black man's arms. Six inches out and the bullet would plough into her soft flesh. He con-

trolled his breathing, aimed and fired. The Kaffir threw up his arms and fell. Simon ran on. Sybella ran toward him. Pushing her away he rushed toward the Kaffir, knife in hand. The wounded Kaffir was crouched before him, holding his spear short for a thrust. But Simon did not jump him, instead he ran past him and the spear thrust only tore the shirt on his back. Then he turned and drove his long knife into the Kaffir's back. He lay on his face. His body twisting. The horn-handled knife that Mina had pressed into his hands in that long ago of a few weeks stood out between his shoulders.

Sybella flung herself into his arms sobbing, "She saved me, she saved me. It should have been me and I hated her."

Simon began to cry too as he looked down at the girl he had been coming to meet so happily. He raised her in his arms.

Her long gold eyelashes fluttered, her grey eyes opened wide and she smiled into his face. "It was love, Simon," she said, "Ja, before God it was love and I am not afraid." She sank back and he thought her dead. Then she seemed to stiffen as if she was forcing herself to come back. "Jappie," she said, "you will care for Jappie? I would have him grow up to be a man like you."

"Ja, ja," Sybella said, "we will take him."

"We?" Mina smiled up at her. "Ja, it will be we," she said, "but the we will not be Simon and me any longer. That we is gone."

Then she died, softly, gently, relaxing like a bloom whose stem is cut.

Simon picked up the dead Kaffir's spear and drove it through his body so hard that its shaft stood quivering. Already the vultures were there. A great shadow swept over the ground at his feet, over Mina, darkening her body as he bent to pick her up.

So they returned to the camp. Simon with Mina's body over

his shoulder. Sybella crying and carrying his gun ready to hand it to him.

This was a strange and terrible thing. To be carrying his loved one, dead, her body still warm and pliant as it had been in life. Her fair hair hanging over his belt, her head dangling on its supple neck that had once been so bravely proud and erect. A few minutes ago they had all been living. Mina, the Kaffir. What had possessed him to attack? Hatred of the white man, desire to despoil a white woman? What sudden savage motive had driven him to leap like a tiger on a defenceless doe? Dead now. With a spear through his belly and the vultures already at his eyes and bowels. Strange things, these matters of life and death, of love and birth, of affection and hatred. Strange that he who three months ago had hated no one, now hated all Kāffirs for what they had done. Strange that this had been forced upon him. Strange that these weeks should have been so punctuated by funerals, not of many, but of the best. Of the two Potgieters, or rather of one and the remains of the other and his friends. Of the Prinsloos, for those were believed by all to be what had been found in the cave of tusks, and now of his golden darling, whose body and heart he knew so well, the girl who had given herself to him.

Sybella was saying, "Simon, you saved my life."

Magtig, he thought, I am sick of saving the lives of maidens. Sick of death, of gunfire, of stunks and putrescence, for I who am only just a man have seen things I shall never forget.

A dozen burghers ran to meet them as they came near the laager. He told his tale of the two maidens walking, thinking the war over, themselves safe, and of the Kaffir, one of the living flotsam of this sea of death, impelled to kill for its own sake, for his love of blood. Of the accident of his being there, of his lucky shot, that had saved Sybella. He thought, If only my dog had been with me Mina might still be alive. But his dog would not leave Schalk's bitch who was in heat

though she was his dam. So a life was lost because of a bitch in heat.

It was all incredible, unbelievable in such beauty, for never in this mauve and lilac evening hour, usually consecrated to love, had Africa been more beautiful. In the trees the doves cooed. He thought of the doves cooing as they made love. He thought of the vultures which were also birds, and that among birds there were good and evil kinds, as among men. He thought of old Schalk and the wolf that had ruined his life. Again, if he had had his dogs with him he would have been saved. Odd that a man should so often depend on his hounds for his life. No dogs, a lame horse, the misfiring of a gun, the sun in your eyes instead of behind you, all these things might be the difference between life and death.

When they reached the blue wagon Schalk called to him. "What is it, Simon? Is she hurt? Has she been struck by a serpent?"

"Ja," Simon said, "a black one with a spear. The child is dead." He laid her down on a kaross that lay on the ground by the wagon, and resting his head in his arms against its sides that he had painted so happily less than two years ago, began to weep with great sobs that shook his shoulders and wracked his body down to his loins. His love, his dear love, was dead. All that gentle softness, all that perfumed flesh that had been his alone was gone. Still there, still warm, still soft, but the shell was empty, the spirit flown like a bird from the beautiful cage of its flesh. This thing on the kaross was not Mina. It was like an empty house with a sagging roof and broken windows from which its owners had fled.

Schalk said, "We are getting ready to trek to-morrow. Ja, to-morrow we are going home."

If it had been to-day she would still be living, he thought.

Schalk said, "Let her lie here. For this is the place she loved beneath the tree where our wagon has been outspanned.

Only yesterday she said, 'Oupa, this is a beautiful place. I should like to stay here for a long time.' "

"A long time," Simon said, "Ja, forever is a long time."

Here then beneath his feet that body would rot, be eaten by worms, dug up by jackals and hynas, unless buried deeply in a grave packed with stones both at the side and above, for if it was only covered with stones they dug into it from the sides. Now the newly dug graves of men, women and children were scattered in the north. At the drift, at the end of the valley near the caves and now here. One day, he thought, I shall come back and lay a great stone upon the place where she lies.

Here lies a brave Boer girl. A Christian maid who died for love.

Jappie had flung himself upon his sister's body with sobs of fright and fury. "Verdamnt Kaffirs," he shouted, his face red with anger, wet with tears. "Wait till I am a man."

It was impossible to calm him. His small, almost square body seemed almost to be composed entirely of muscle. He would not be carried off. He bit Simon's hand when he tried to lift him. He kicked Sybella's shins. He even glared at old Schalk when he came near. It was only his friend the bushman that he would allow near him.

"Baas," the bushman said, "let the baasie sit with his dead, for though he looks like a child in his heart he is already a man and able to bear his pain."

So they left the child who stared down at his dead sister's face with her gold hair grasped in his hand as he muttered the oaths that he had picked up here and there from the Hottentot drivers and servants among whom he had spent so much of his time. "My mother," he said, "my sister, and now I am alone." He glared around him with fierce blue eyes and said, "I am too small to stand alone."

"You are not alone," Simon said. "We will take you."

"We?" the child said. "Who is we?"

Simon pointed at Sybella.

THE SPEAR

"You, and that man?" he looked at Sybella and then at Simon.

"Ja," Sybella said. "We will." For death which had just ended one thing had now begun another.

The child still glared as though not satisfied but prepared to make the best of things. Then he went to Sybella and hid his face in her skirt, clinging to her legs with small dirty hands and sobbing out his sorrow. Now he was no longer a little man, but a small boy, a child, but al' had seen the man he would become.

21. Moorddrift

IT WAS unbelievable, Simon thought, that he and Sybella should make love so soon after Mina's death. Unbelievable, but they had. Drawn together by the events of the last few days, seeking to comfort each other, it had happened, one thing leading to another. The kisses to embraces, then the embraces of their young bodies had become closer till the two had merged into one.

Both were ashamed but unable to resist the forces that drove them to each other. They began by talking of Mina and ended in each other's arms. The love begun at the Cape was now consummated, the slowly ripening fruit had fallen.

Together, laughing and blushing, they looked at the drawings Simon had made of her bathing. Then Mina would come between them both as a bond and a separation. Because of their feelings of guilt they lavished attention and love on Jappie who was now reconciled to this new state of affairs. But about the two, enclosed in their love as meat is enclosed by the shell of an egg, other events were taking place.

Schalk had now a recognised place in the community of the north. It was at last acknowledged that only a brave and resolute man could have done what he did when Frikkie was hurt beyond recovery.

The boy's father came and shook him by the hand. "You must forgive me, Mencer," he said. "You did that which I should have done had I had the courage."

The Boers began to sort themselves out, forming little groups that would travel home together, peeling off as they reached the tracks that led to their farms, unwinding the rope of their association into finer and finer strands till at last each man found himself alone with his relatives, riding toward his home.

The talk now was not of war but of rain. Here the drought had still not broken but each man hoped that there had been a ploughing rain in his district. The captured herds of cattle were divided according to custom. Lots were drawn for the first pick and day by day the Boers parted from their comrades. The Commandos returned as they had come, to pick up their wives where they had left them, and peace returned to Africa, the ruffled waters of unrest were stilled for the time being at least.

Simon returned with the Schoemansdal Commando, sleeping each night beside Schalk's wagon. Sybella slept within it with Jappie in her arms.

The dorp rejoiced to see them home. Simon's boys were glad to see him. The boys, oxen and horses were fat with idleness. Simon still rode the Commandant General's horse. He had given it to him, saying, "A man should not be parted from a horse he has used in war." Kruger had said good-bye before he left with the Rustenburg Commando, saying they would meet again, and all over the north the little clouds of dust stirred up by the riding men and the wagons rose into the still hot air.

At last, after a week of visiting and saying good-bye, Simon and Sybella left with Jappie in their wagon.

They had said good-bye to Schalk. They had stood with the child Jappie between them, each holding one of his hands. They would be married at Warmbad by the predicant. Then they would journey to the Cape, taking the old road that

led past the Ouplek where Sybella would see her mother. Then when they had visited Simon's father at Constantia they would return. In eighteen months or two years they would be back to take up the land Simon had been granted—eight thousand morgen of hunting and grazing veld with a fertile valley where he could lead water on to his lands. Simon was looking forward to going home but already, before he arrived there, looking forward to coming back. This was where he belonged—in the north, in the Waterberg and the Zoutpansberg, in the Blaumberg. He had been disappointed in nothing, least of all his bride. They both loved Jappie, a little man already, bold, savagely independent but affectionate. They had no worries about Schalk. He was established now as a leader who had taken the place of Herman Potgieter as a hunter of renown, a man whose counsel was sought by all. A friend to his people and a terror to the wild Kaffirs among whom this masked man had become a legend.

Schalk said, "When you go home, Sybella, bear no malice. She knew not what she did. In her eyes she acted for the best."

"Ja, Pa," Sybella said, wondering at this man who was her father, so gentle, so forgiving, yet in war so terrible. But in her heart she knew she could not forgive her mother.

Jan, now a stripling, took her hand. "God go with you, sister," he said. "You have a fine man who is more than a brother to me." This was a lot from Jan, who spoke seldom.

Her father's little bushman was weeping. The tears hung filling the wrinkles in his face and running on, for this girl was like one of his own. "Come back, Juffrou, come back to us," he said.

The big, shaggy, rough-haired dogs stood near her, licking her hands as if they too knew that she was going, that this was the end of something. What they did not know was that

it was also a beginning, an interlude between two phases of her life.

Simon was content, for this girl had filled his cup of happiness. His memories of Mina had scarred him, his soul would be forever marked by that experience of love and courage, but what was past was past. She had died as she had lived, in virtue and courage, giving her life for a friend, for there was no doubt that the two girls had loved each other. Had it not been for me, he thought, they would have loved like sisters. He thought of Mina's grave by Mapela's kop and he looked down at her little brother, their charge and joy.

Once more they shook hands all around. Schalk kissed his daughter and held her to him. The servants wept and said, "Come back, come back."

Then Sybella and her maid climbed into Simon's wide-tired wagon whose spoor all men knew. The whip cracked and the great wheels turned as the oxen took the strain with their heads turned toward the south.

Once again a couple of weeks later they outspanned at the Nyl drift, slept in their wagon beside the trees where the dead had lain, and drank from the stream that once, not so long ago, had run red with blood.

In the morning Simon sitting hatless on his red roan horse watched the wagon go and turned back to the drift to be alone once more with his memories and relive the past. He rode his horse into the water which rippled in little waves about its legs. Then he turned, and, his horse's reins in his hands, knelt at the grave beneath the trees. He prayed to God to make him worthy of his trust to Mina, promising that her brother would be as dear as his own sons. Once more he looked at the slow brown water, at the tall reeds, at the flotsam caught in the branches of the bush from last year's floods, and said aloud, "Moorddrift . . ." A name never to be

THE MASK

forgotten by our people, a testament and memorial to Mina, the girl none but he would remember but to whom the ford would owe its name.

In the wagon Sybella, with Jappie on her knees, looked back at Simon as he waited at the ford. Simon, the man she loved and was so soon to marry. She thought of Mina and their last words together. "Would you have waited?" Mina had said.

Waited, she thought. How long did we wait? With her body hardly cold in its grave. How unjust she had been to the girl who had saved her life. For girls in love, in the fierce spring of their desire, did not wait, neither for bed nor preacher, but were taken and gave themselves like animals on the ground as their first parents in the Garden of Eden must have done.

How right Mina had been. How right, how good, how brave. Ja, she thought, she would have made him a fine wife. And as she looked back she saw Simon dismount and pray at Mina's mother's grave, at the mass grave of all the massacred dead. This was the place that he had found her. Now of that trek only little Jappie remained alive.

The past was over. The future lay before them. Marriage, two thousand miles of travel, adventure, Jappie and the children she would bear this man who would soon gallop up to overtake her.

.

When Simon left the drift a baboon barked in the hills. "The man has gone," he said, and his tribe came down from the krans to turn the stones on the foothills seeking for the scorpions they loved to eat and feared to kill. The water birds that had been hiding returned and once again the drift was at peace, without a sign of massacre save that the earth of the great grave was not yet fully covered with grass and weeds. The water ran on to the sea, the home of all waters, the sun

MOORDDRIFT

rose into the sky as it had before men, either black or white, had come to this land; as it had before the bushmen hunters had come, for neither the river nor the sun cared about what men call time. Others unknown to us had drunk and died here, had slept here, made love here, and the world went on—each thing, each man, each ant, living and dying within its sphere, each the result of others that had preceded it. Each the cause of those who were to come.

Who would guess then or to-day that this water had once run red with blood as it laps at the spoor of those who come to it to drink, or cross its shallow bed? The trees, the tall reeds, the birds, are still there, different but unchanged as the hills are unchanged and the sky above them.

As long as there are men there will be memories of Moord-drift, the little ford that leads to the still mysterious north.

GLOSSARY

- Aasvoel** — vulture
Biltong — sun-dried meat, game or ox
Bobotie — a curry dish of chopped meat with rice
Boer — farmer
Bosman — bushman
Brei — to cure a skin
Disselboom — pole of a wagon or cart
Dorp — village
Drift — ford
Impi — regiment
Induna — lesser chief, often of royal blood
Jong — young man
Juffrou — young woman, miss
Kaross — skin rug
Kartel — bed in wagon made of crisscrossed rawhide strips
Kloof — valley or crack in the hills
Konfyt — preserves, sugar cured
Kop — hill, mountain
Koppie — hillock, a small kop
Kraal — corral or native village, usually circular
Krans — cliff
Kyk — look
Laager — defensive camp of warriors locked together
Mealies — corn
Mooi meisie — pretty girl
Naboom — euphorbia, a giant cactuslike tree
Papegaai — parrot
Pens — belly
Rankie — low ridge
Riem — rawhide thong
Roer — gun
Roonkat — lynx or caracal
Sassarties — alternate pieces of meat and bacon roasted on stick
Sjambok — heavy rawhide whip or rhino whip
Spruit — small river
Stad — town
Tiger — leopard
Veldschoen — homemade rawhide shoes
Vlei — swamp or marsh
Voorhuis — front room or hall
Voorlooper — leader of oxen
Wildebeest — gnu
Windvoel — Wind Bird (hair of horse)
Wolf — hyena

